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ABSTRACTION

Abstraction in the '80s, Off the Wall/In the Air, Ian Burn, The Subversive Stitch, Thierry de Duve, Czech Avant Garde, John Nixon.

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Cover
Ian Burn
Blue Reflex, 1966-67
auto-lacquer, epoxy resin on wood panel.

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West is an inter-disciplinary journal which focuses attention on 'objects' that reside at the intersection of a range of different disciplines, with the question of representation as the common concern. One of the specific interests of *West* is focusing on the social and geographic landscape in which it is based, namely Western Sydney.

West aims to:

- provide a vehicle for critical writing and image-making concerned with cultural practice and criticism;
- encourage the publication of substantial writings and images on this general theme from a number of different disciplines specifically in the fields of design, sound, the visual and writing;
- explore the relations between disciplines, a task all the more urgent at present, given the seperations which are perceived between the sciences and the arts and humanities in terms of relative social value.

Rex Butler

EDITORIAL

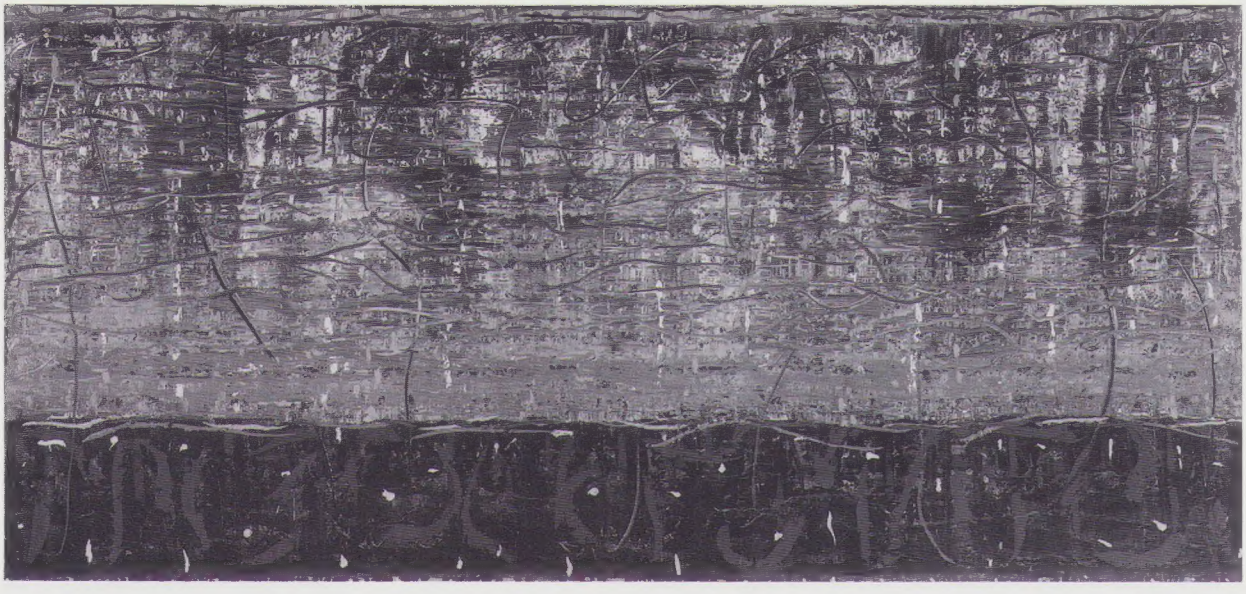
there is no such thing as abstraction

What would it mean to say that Abstraction is not anything ? In her essay, in this issue of West, 'Abstraction: From the '60s to the '80s and Back Again', Catharine Lumby takes issue with the curator Victoria Lynn's attempts to try to define abstraction stylistically or historically: "expressive", "spiritual", "simulationist", "conceptual"... Instead, she speaks of abstraction as reflecting a world where "reference points are disappearing", the progressive swallowing-up of the work of art within a logic that renders it a mere illustration or example. In this sense, all works of art become "abstract": the actual object becomes unimportant, it can always be judged in advance...

This is the dilemma Thierry de Duve takes up and my own article addresses, in reviewing his essay 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas' : the necessity of choosing between a Formalist aesthetic and a Modernist logic. The first requires the work of art to be judged each time anew, without any rules, the second allows for a certain generalisation of judgement, in which the work of art does not have to be "good" but merely "interesting". The abstraction of art for de Duve would not so much lie in a certain style or period as in a form of logic, the reduction of art to a model, the second of those two alternatives. But against this, is it possible to write a specific history of art anymore? This is the question de Duve asks and it is perhaps the question the rest of this issue is concerned with, from Ian Burn's caution to us not to forget the material history and context of Conceptual Art to the essays of Charles Green, Jenny Zimmer and Marian Dzurik and Ann Stephen which attempt to re-capture specific moments and events in the history of art.

An important work to consider in this regard would be Ian Burn's *Blue Reflex*, a deep blue monochrome buffed with car polish so that it reflects its surroundings. What is specific to the work? To what extent is the work only a reflection of its context, both physical and institutional (theoretical, historical)? What is at stake anymore in some phenomenological contact with the work? Can it not be reduced to a kind of "art theory"? It is possible, that is to say, that the work is not merely abstract but about the very process of abstraction in the sense we are trying to define. These would also be the questions raised by Sherrie Levine's "photographic readymades" (those appropriations of Walker Evans, Eliot Porter and Edward Weston) where the work is similarly seen to be merely an effect of its various contexts, its various readings. And it would also be what is at stake in the work of John Nixon, whose work we reproduce here. One of the questions Nixon asks is: how to erect a specific art practice out of one of the most generic, translatable symbols of them all — the cross? Is there such a thing as a specific use of the cross ; can the cross be imbued with specific meanings?

The attempt to recover specific moments of history — Green, Zimmer, Dzurik and Stephen — is modest, but it is perhaps this "modesty" that is the only thing saving us from the progressive "abstraction" of art into nothing, a form of logic in which all works finally become the same.



Michael Johnson
After Serious, 1987-8
oil on canvas
Photo courtesy Art Gallery of N.S.W.

Catharine Lumby

ABSTRACTION

from the '60s to the '80s and back again

The sixties arrived in the Sydney artworld around 1965 — late, jetlagged and abstract with a capital A. It would be almost the next decade before its remnants began to grace the homes of the hipper bourgeoise.

1965 was the year a generation of Australian artists returned from overseas — Michael Johnson, Tony McGillick, Dick Watkins, fresh from the ambience of swinging London, and Sydney Ball, soaked in the urbanity of New York. They came home at a time when art journals blithely spoke of "revolutions in style", when fashion made a statement and when there was still a culture to counter. As Patrick McCaughey tells it, they were artists who found in practitioners such as Anthony Caro, Kenneth Noland and Ellsworth Kelly "superior sustenance than they found in an Arthur Boyd or a Sidney Nolan"[1]. Their liberation from the referential was equally a liberation from the Australian landscape and the Australian identity.

The tempo of acceptance for their work gathered pace. In 1968, the National Gallery of Victoria devoted its first large temporary exhibition to the new breed of painters. *The Field* included work by Dick Watkins, Sydney Ball, Dale Hickey, Michael Johnson, Alun Leach-Jones, Robert Jacks, Paul Partos, David Aspden, Robert Hunter, Nigel Lendon and Tony McGillick. It was hailed by progressive critics as radical and ground-breaking. Writing in *Art and Australia*, Patrick McCaughey opined:

> The new abstractionists have set a cracking pace for subsequent developments in Australian art... If they can maintain their experimental attitude towards their own art and resist the doctrinaire and the didactic, the modernist movement in Australian art may cease to be a series of hesitant, fitful starts. Eventually, it may even make its own contribution to the upbuilding and progress of the modernist tradition.[2]

Today it is clear that few of these artists (with the notable exceptions of Dick Watkins and Robert Hunter) managed to develop and expand the framework of their practice throughout the seventies or eighties — at best some would continue to paint endless variations on the same theme. Michael Johnson is the best example of the latter — a painter who was once unkindly described by a leading Australian art scholar as "the most consistent painter in Australian history". Unlike many of his contemporaries, Johnson has resisted the siren call of figuration and remained obstinately committed to the principles of "avant-garde" abstraction. Even today he remains an interesting study in post-painterly abstraction — conceptual art and eighties post-modernism have left his practice unscathed. In a catalogue essay for Johnson's recent retrospective at the Art Gallery of NSW, Victoria Lynn described his work as "very much his reality: writing without a grammar, music without a score... his paintings are about painting in the most elemental and personal sense".[3] His work, then, aspires to be both a pure imprint of the process of painting — an assertion of geometry and colour over any narrative or historical concerns — and a cipher for the artist's subjectivity. In a recent interview with Terence Maloon, Johnson alluded to the latter part of the process: "The choice of colour is an emotional decision which is hard to account for... For me, there's an unstable, personal, open way of claiming colour".[4]

What Johnson's work illustrates is that content in post-painterly abstraction is always formal rather than iconographic. The statement, of course, is a simplification, but it is one which takes us to the heart of the significance of the school and to the pre-eminent apologist for the colour-field painting of the sixties, Clement Greenberg, for whom the avant-garde was the battlefront against kitsch and debasement. High Modernism and the demanding, inaccessible nature of its art was, for Greenberg, a continual act of resistance to the easy accessibility of manufactured mass culture and manipulative political symbols. As early as 1939, Greenberg argued that, through the sacrifice of narrative line and figuration, the visual arts could carve out their own domain and be strengthened. The central canon of modernist abstraction for him was a line of resistance to reproduction.

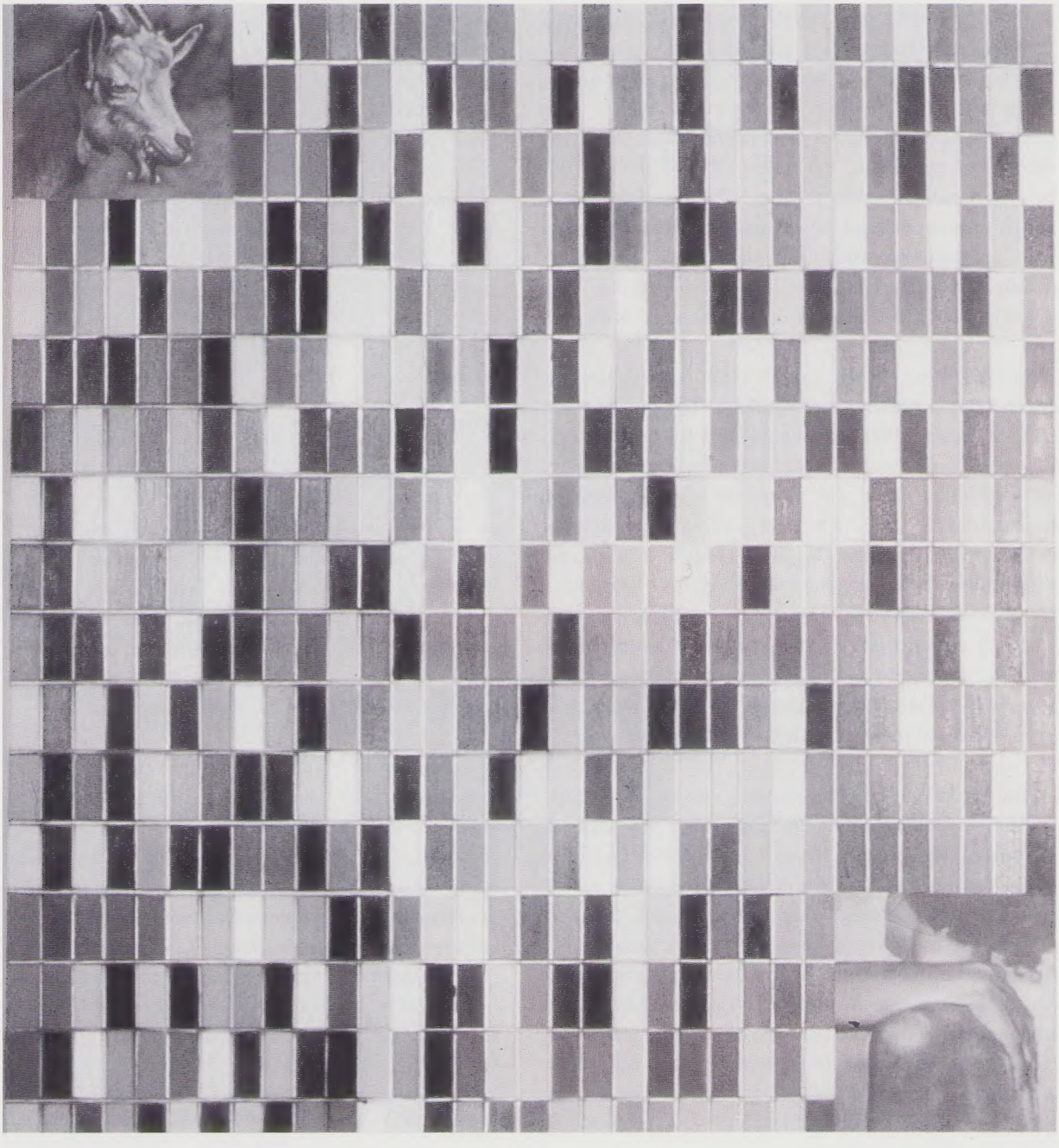
Looking at the return to abstraction witnessed in various pockets of the art world over the past five years, we

find, ironically, that: "simulation has penetrated the art form... that resisted it most".[5] The purpose of this brief essay, then, is to trace the shifts that have occurred in the intervening decades and to characterise the significance of abstraction in Australian painting today.

The eighties were characterised by a perceived loss of the modernist ideal and its tradition of formal abstraction. At the same time its canons have continued to occupy a central position — as a supposed referent for much of the dematerialising and postmodern practice which followed. Much like the decade which spawned it, formal abstraction has become an icon of everything the '70s and '80s were not. In the eighties, the tropes of abstraction increasingly became a form of shorthand for referring to values perceived as out of the reach of contemporary artists — faith in style, authenticity and a clearly defined project for art practice.

The groundwork for this return to the motifs of abstraction was laid in the early eighties in "deconstructive" work. Artists such as Richard Dunn and Merilyn Fairskye began to juxtapose figurative images with monochromatic panels. The, somewhat literal, point of the exercise was to provide an oppositional reading within the work itself, thereby establishing a kind of auto-critique of the historical conventions of painting to which the work had returned. A more sophisticated use of the quotational genre can be seen in the earlier work of such artists as Janet Burchill. For Burchill and many of her contemporaries the grid format became a motif which symbolised a crisis of wider dimensions. Burchill's early '80s works, in which the grid appears sometimes as an overlay but most often as a formatting device, refer constantly to a muteness or aphasia which has descended on art. The specificity of the reference to abstraction is lost here — unlike Dunn, Burchill was not seeking to cross-reference and place images: instead she employs a generic model of abstraction. She is not quoting another artist's work but distilling a familiar typology of geometric forms. Her early work marks an important turning point for the role of abstraction in contemporary art — the move from self-conscious quotation to the copy without referent. On this level her early work can be compared with the American artist Sherrie Levine whose work has widely been seen as mapping the endgame of modern art. Levine describes her abstract work as "distillations rather than copies". Similarly, Burchill's work flattens out a number of typologies simultaneously — this generic look conveys both a sense of loss and recognition.

This sense of loss or crisis of representation which began to seep into the works of many younger artists in the mid-80s has an important link to the history of abstraction itself. The spectre of the end of representation was already prefigured or longed for with the birth of abstraction itself. In the classic modernist trajectory abstract work was meant to work through to a final essence or truth and expire — it was characterised, in other words, by an apocalyptic myth. The history of abstraction is also the history of artists who have sought to make the last painting and pronounce the last rites. Modernism has always toyed with an endgame scenario — the difference in the past ten years is one of degree. For many contemporary artists abstraction has become a symbol of the end. One way of understanding this shift is to look back to the birth of abstraction. Following Walter Benjamin, it is useful to place the appearance of abstraction in the context of the development of mass production and the mechanical reproduction of images. Challenged by industrialisation, painting sought out a new ground for itself. Abstraction proclaimed this year zero for art. But, as Yves-Alain Bois has pointed out in his essay 'Painting: The Task of Mourning', this line of resistance was always doomed because "the modernist opposition to both traditional painterly finish and the mechanical bore within it the stigmata of the mass-produced".[6] On the simplest level, industrialisation led to new materials — mass-produced paint — which freed the artist from the studio. More profoundly, industrialisation signalled the proliferation of the commodity as fetish — a phenomenon which has haunted art throughout the twentieth century. The irony is that the work which conceived itself as a rejection of mass production was destined to become the ultimate commodity. Unencumbered by use value, abstract art has become, in our century, the ultimate fetish object. The



John Young
Blue, not Cool, Goat (the general & the particular), 1989
oil on linen
Photo courtesy Yuill/Crowley.

sometimes outrageous prices attached to modernist "masterpieces" such as Ad Reinhardt's black squares is a function of their lack of measurable value. There are no visual referents with which to compare the image — the work functions as an ideal or symbolic value. Under the shadow of capitalism, the extent of this paradox has become harder for artists to ignore. The financial markets appear to have detached themselves from any relationship with the material world, currencies float, geography dissolves in the face of technology. Indeed, capital itself might be said to have outdone abstraction at its own game.

For art these events have widely been viewed as engendering a crisis in representation. The problem is a crisis in whose terms? From a modernist point of view, the past two decades have been plagued by bad faith and a loss of the stability, order and proportion once provided by formal values. From a contemporary perspective, the crisis is one of re-articulation. To put it crudely, it is a crisis which maps the seeming bind of the binary — apparently always a re-iteration of one term. The problem is how to articulate an art practice which marks out its difference from the dominant goals of Western art practice without continually invoking them. The nature of this problem is traced out in the more recent use of abstraction.

The "crisis" in abstraction, then, can be — perhaps crudely — parallelled with the crises which have dogged all forms of formalism in the past three decades. As Peter Halley describes it: "It seems no longer possible to accept geometric order as either transcendental order, detached signifier, or as the basic gestalt of visual perception".[7] According to the work of Halley, Levine, Bleckner and others, abstraction is now simply a model — a constructed reference point or norm. The world of essences, which was posed by the champions of modernism, turns out in this scenario to be dominated by the commodity rather than the spirit. The utopia Greenberg looked to is characterised by alienation and banality.

More fundamentally, we might say that abstraction itself has ceased to be a relevant category. Turning to Australian works of the past few years we can see the interchangeability of the figurative and the abstract. John Young's latest works are a case in point. Departing from his familiar minimal, monochromatic ground, Young has more recently shown works which juxtapose colourful grids against animal and human figures. The pose and the grids are rendered equivalent as forms of compositional criteria — the distinction between the two collapses. His works resonate with a super abundance of references and processes which have been reduced to the surface of a single track. Where classical abstraction was hermetic, emphasising the passage of light, Young's use of the format is purely superficial. The surfaces are simply that — reflective and flat.

On a symbolic level this collapse is hardly surprising. The founding metaphor of abstract art was a refusal of representation and the materiality of the object. In this sense the modernist project was based on negativity, defining itself by what it was not — representative. The intervening decades, however, have seen an erosion of confidence in representation of every kind — the presumed natural order which abstraction turned its back on is no longer a given. The negative referent which underpinned abstraction has itself disappeared.

In the midst of this much-vaunted crisis in representation, abstraction has become little more than a generic format among others. The term is virtually meaningless. It is a matter highlighted by the difficulty many critics and curators have in pinning the term down. In a recent survey of contemporary abstract work at the Art Gallery of NSW, curator Victoria Lynn wrestled with this unicorn. In her catalogue essay she says: "The diversity of contemporary abstraction has engendered and revivified an endless list of labels and definitions: 'conceptual', 'geometric', 'simulationist', 'dreaming', 'quotational', 'expressive', 'spiritual', 'relational', 'materialist', 'formal' and 'organic' abstraction... But despite these infinite permuations, the labels never seem to cover adequately the concerns of contemporary artists who draw on the abstract mode".[8] Little wonder.

For an understanding of what contemporary abstraction

means Lynn might more profitably have turned to one of the artists in the exhibition, A.D.S.Donaldson. She quotes him in her catalogue essay as saying his paintings are carriers of "the mundane expectations of abstraction". It is a theme which goes to the heart of the transformation which abstraction has undergone in the past three decades and one which curator/critic Rex Butler explored in his recent show *Banal Art*. Donaldson's *Banal Painting*, Butler argues, at once poses and deems banal, the fundamental paradox which attaches to the modernist grid/monochrome: "the fact that the monochrome is at once what every new art movement wants to speak of and yet what it must fail to".[9] In Donaldson's scenario, according to Butler, criticality and collusion in relation to quotation have become indistinguishable. "Quotationality could never finally upset the canon of images or destroy the notion of the author: its critical force will always be parasitic upon them, just as they will never be free from the indeterminacy introduced by the possibility of re-iteration. But it might be this logic itself which puts an 'end' to quotationality as a strategy, which reduces quotationality to banality, everywhere and nowhere at once".

This banal logic which Butler identifies at work in contemporary art is perhaps most brutally apparent in art discourse. For the critic, in recent times, all art has become abstract in this sense: reference points are rapidly disappearing. Faced with this evaporation, critics have increasingly filled in the void with their own simulation of a classic modernist logic — a discussion of the unrepresentable.

NOTES

(1) Patrick McCaughey, 'Surviving the Seventies in Australia', *Anything Goes*, ed. Paul Taylor, Art & Text Publications, 1984, p. 150.

(2) Patrick McCaughey, 'The Significance of The Field', *Art & Australia*, December 1968, p. 242.

(3) Victoria Lynn, 'Michael Johnson', *Michael Johnson — A Retrospective*, Art Gallery of NSW, 1989 .

(4) Michael Johnson in interview with Terence Maloon, in *Michael Johnson — A Retrospective*, Art Gallery of NSW, 1989.

(5) Hal Foster, 'Signs Taken For Wonders', *Art in America*, June 1986, p. 90.

(6) Yves-Alain Bois, 'Painting: The Task of Mourning', *Endgame*, MIT Press, 1986, p. 32.

(7) Peter Halley, *Peter Halley: Collected Essays*, Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1990, p. 75.

(8) Victoria Lynn, 'Abstraction', Art Gallery of NSW, 1990, p. 5.

(9) Rex Butler, 'Banal Art', Artspace, 1991, p. 4.

Catalogue cover for the exhibition,
The Subversive Stitch, 1991
Courtesy Monash University Gallery.

Charles Green and Stephen Wickham

ABSTRACT?

> Our period seems to me the poorest ever imaginatively, and people are sub-letting the leftovers of the strong ideas from the beginning of the century
>
> Jean Baudrillard

I

Is there a revival of abstract painting in Australia? There may be, if we judge by the interest in abstraction shown by younger artists, the recent wave of critical attention on that painting, and the almost exclusive representation of their work in the most dynamic alternative spaces of Sydney and Melbourne.[1] However, is this question meaningful or interesting? If we concentrate on the most superficial aspect of this practice — its abstract form — we mistake the crucial issues: a contest exists over the territory of the immediate; as always, words and text are used as weapons.

There is perpetual friction between art criticism and its object, artists and their public. Most artists and much of the art community perceive the role of criticism as *instrumental* — as a service industry for the interpretation, explanation and mediation of artists' works. The evidence for this view is overwhelming and, to the degree that it is assumed to be the natural state of things, critics are regularly berated for inaccurately representing the intentions of artists. In 1988 at a conference on the state of Australian art, for example, Mike Parr argued:

> How can we give an account of the difference of gesture with the degree of certainty with which you are trying to suggest ; surely we've got to take into account the intention of the artist.[2]

Parr's comment occurred in the context of controversy over *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic John McDonald's attacks on the reputation of artist John Nixon. Nixon's reductive abstract paintings and installations, all of which are informed by the artist's study of Russian Suprematism and Kasimir Malevich, had been compared unfavourably with photo-realist paintings of dogs by a minor illustrative artist, Patrick Hockey. Nixon's art was pivotal in the formation of the new abstraction that appeared in Australian alternative spaces; many younger artists were affected by his example, both through his teaching and strategic rejections and alliances with commercial and institutional galleries. At all points of his career — from graduation at Melbourne's National Gallery School in 1970 — Nixon sought to exercise control and influence the interpretation of his non-objective art. He created Art Projects, an alternative gallery in a run-down office building on Melbourne's Lonsdale Street. Tireless in his activity as curator and self-publicist, he was a role-model for a newer conception of the impresario artist. Nixon is therefore one of the few Australian artists to consistently and successfully internalise the changed rhetoric that surrounded avant-garde institutionalisation and commodification during the Eighties. The establishment, late in the decade, of active, artist-controlled alternative exhibition spaces in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as a desire by younger artists to define themselves *against* the recent past through non-objective works, reflected Nixon's aesthetic influence. The willing co-operation of younger critics and curators reinforced this frenetic self-promotion.

John Nixon's, and Mike Parr's, hostility towards established institutions is both ambivalent and obligatory. In order to define avant-garde *difference*, hostility towards traditionally conservative newspaper art criticism, appears mandatory. Basically, such animosity is necessary because critics invariably have usurped a portion of interpretive control. I shall return later to the subject of artists' equivocations with fairly normative postmodernist textual distinctions, such as Barthes' interrogation of authorship.[3] However, in a 1991 letter to the Melbourne *Age* responding to an article by art critic Christopher Heathcote, Mike Parr stated:

> To claim that ... I believe that "critical discussion should not examine the work of art but concern itself solely with artistic intention" is to set up a dichotomy that I regard as meaningless.[4]

Parr clearly sees no division between the activity of

reading and the author/artist's intention; there is no disparity between the two.

This instrumental notion of theory seems arrogant; it lacks self-criticality, although the words I have cited are by an artist whose own work is immensely complex, literate and considered. However, it suggests many uncomplimentary valuations of art's audience which, it seems, requires gate-keepers and watch-dogs. Another view suggests that theory and criticism are *competitive* discourses. Articulated by Joseph Kosuth, for example, during the Sixties, and more recently by Meaghan Morris, this perspective allows that criticism has its own intentions, desires and histories.[5] As Morris observes: "Quite simply, the object predicated by reviewing is never complete".[6] Here, criticism refers to art, but is not its instrument.

One crucial link between the discourses surrounding previous and present abstractions is the emphasis placed on the intentionality of artworks. Inevitably, there is a ubiquitous stress on the purposes and meanings associated with abstract painting. These are bitterly contested by younger artists with opposing notions of history — on the one hand, those for whom the past represents an Authority to be subverted and, on the other, those for whom it offers reassurance and inspiration. However, the drift of this debate is at odds with post-structural understandings of intertextuality which have by now, as I have observed, become widely accepted in critical and artistic practice. There is a vast gulf between artists' determination to shape discourse and an acceptance of the death of the author. In particular, the distinction between the two great modernist methods — Duchamp's nomination of aesthetic objects as opposed to Picasso's gestalt manipulation of the painted surface — can be camouflaged in abstract painting. Its current practitioners manage to combine both of these approaches.

Above, I have paraphrased my description of Seventies art in the catalogue essay for *Off the Wall In the Air: A Seventies Selection* .[7] There I argued, too obliquely for some, that the phenomenological and radical intentions of those artists inevitably resulted in a desire to control interpretative discourse. Most of the artists in that exhibition, for example Micky Allen, Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy, insisted on working within the gallery system. The contradiction between this, and their essentially romantic radical intentions, led to an inability to completely acknowledge the circulation of artworks as commodities, and a subsequent recuperation into a more conventional forest of signs. It is important, at all times, to emphasise that artists are far from voiceless.

II

Recently, Stephen Wickham interviewed a selection of Melbourne artists working within an abstract idiom.[8] Painters such as these continue to represent or critique the praxis that we take to be paradigmatically Modernist. His intention was not to misrepresent the commitment with which the five artists — Elisabeth Newman, Tim Bass, Allan Mitelman, John Dunkley-Smith and Julie Irving — approach their practice, nor to pretend that such a small sample might reflect any wider consensus. However, the terrain of abstraction's discursive and theoretical landscape is presently marked by abrupt gulfs and intersections. Three areas of interest recur in most public discussions about the so-called revival of abstract art: the relation between abstract art, modernism and postmodernism; the political and social programs that have been associated with abstract art; and abstraction's possible spiritual content. A casual survey of journals covering contemporary art, for example *Agenda*, *Eyeline* and the now-defunct *Tension*, confirms this.

The impact of Theory, and its relationship to contemporary abstract painting, is perceived with varying degrees of sympathy and interest by these artists. Tim Bass found the debates surrounding postmodernism in the last decade both personally illuminating and fascinating. Allan Mitelman felt little sympathy or affinity with the most obvious stylistic ingredients of the Eighties — irony and appropriation. John Dunkley-Smith claimed little acquaintance with the recent works of artists like Peter Halley, and was sceptical and disinterested in the claims

made in the early Eighties for the work of Sherrie Levine, maintaining instead that only direct political action could affect discourse. He was aware of his own lack of awareness about contemporary Melbourne artists working on abstract art from within a postmodern framework. Julie Irving felt that she did not know the work of artists like Levine well enough to comment, but felt daunted by Levine's "self-obsession" and journalistic sense of the present. Elisabeth Newman's work, as articulated by the artist and by Melbourne writer Brenda Ludeman, claims to be a post-modern critique of male-dominated modernism. This, for her, is represented by modernist abstract art, especially that of the New York School. Newman brings the feminist perspective, amongst others, of Julia Kristeva to her work.

Can abstract art have a spiritual presence? That assertion polarises conversation amongst younger artists. Many artists demonstrate an awareness of Maurice Tuchman's notorious exhibition, *The Spiritual in Abstract Painting: 1890-1985*, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986. The debates surrounding the Museum of Modern Art's blockbuster exhibition, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, in 1984, were also widely advertised.[9] Equally, Peter Fuller's polemical, anti-modernist art criticism attracted blanket disapproval and covert curiosity during the Eighties. These interviewees denied any suggestion of spiritual intent or aspiration in their work. Julie Irving was alone in her personal curiosity, cautiously suggesting that spirituality is a delicate issue for contemporary artists to acknowledge. Allan Mitelman said that he was not particularly interested in the area. He also, percipiently, noted that most people have very innocent ideas of what it might be. Tim Bass did not wish to rule out the possibility of a metaphysical dimension for art, but chose to distance himself from any such reading that might be attached to his own work. John Dunkley-Smith dismissed the idea, stating that it was an appeal to "higher authority" and represented a dissatisfaction with "material relations". Elisabeth Newman took a critical view of the topic, suggesting, as she did on the pages of *Tension* magazine, that the idea of spirituality was a repressive negation of essential humanity.[10]

What is the effectiveness of the art object as a critique of society? An imperative requirement to locate "criticality" within often reluctant artworks was a reflex of discourse over the last decade. Allan Mitelman asserted that his primary concern was the "engagement with an object". He relativised the role of theoreticians, aestheticians and historians; their job was to look for connections and motivations. He evinced little interest in an art based on theories of consumption, nor in an exhaustive reading of the state of art. He accepted the impossibility of being divorced from society but asserted that an obsession with social and cultural issues would distract one from the primary activity of painting: "many artists are looking for support from anything but their own discipline". Mitelman's effective parody of Theory-based art was balanced by his own wry awareness of his position of privilege and psychological security gained from the process of painting. Tim Bass referred to W.H. Auden's view that a desire to change the world required a career change from artist to politician. Bass cited Noel Counihan as an artist whose political involvement he admired, but whose work, "with all its passion", failed entirely. He believed that only "mainstream political organisation" could affect the world; his awareness of that frustration was obvious. Julie Irving claimed that she had never addressed herself to social issues; she "felt to be at a loss because of that". Aware of feminist politics within art, she nevertheless denied that she was "aware of my gender when I make a picture". Included in the exhibition *A Room of One's Own* at the George Paton Gallery in 1973, she felt that she had been relatively oblivious of the political dimensions of that show, as a precursor of the Melbourne Women's Art movement. Like many artists, Irving painted through the Eighties with no direct involvement in social or political action. John Dunkley-Smith believed that "art practice should be socially engaged". He saw that his works contained metaphoric possibilities regarding social and political questions, but was reluctant to see them "as existing in terms of ... the human condition or the social condition". Reflecting the phenomenological basis of his work during the Seventies, Dunkley-Smith asserted that art should "facilitate people's perception, and if people can actually see things around them ... they perceive the social

and political relations". He agreed that there was a "strong element of the utopian" in his thinking — a "romanticism" that he felt to be closely aligned with the Russian Constructivists. However, like Tim Bass, he felt that "art was no substitute for political activity". Revealingly, he admitted that he was "ultimately completely pessimistic": "The fate of pictures is wall decoration" or to be, at best, "conversation pieces". Dunkley-Smith was aware of the contradiction between his aspirations and his participation in the commercial gallery system.

Elisabeth Newman's art, more clearly than the other artists surveyed, represents the impact of a politicised discourse upon artists' perceptions of subjectivity and identity. Her paintings are both an acknowledgement and a critique of New York abstraction. Newman was critical of the mythologies that position and limit women's' involvement in the art world. That attitude has affinities with the female abstractionists of the late Sixties, who represented the first wave of feminist artists:

> I couldn't be a Jackson Pollock or a Rothko ... a woman is completely excluded from that, not just on a popular level with that mythology that women just aren't geniuses or they are not great artists.

She sought a relationship with her audience that neither intimidated nor excluded: "to have the sort of attitude or mood that I think would empower people". Newman was not concerned by the thought that she might, by exhibiting in a mainstream Melbourne commercial gallery, City Gallery, now represent a figure of some Authority, nor that she might be limiting her audience to a small group of privileged people:

> I think that I definitely want to be there in the argument; I'm not wanting to be showing at Friends of the Earth Gallery, because you are not included in the argument and that is where I want to be. I want to be in there being uncomfortable and annoying to some extent.

III

To paraphrase French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, we are witnessing a frantic production of the effects of the real to compensate for its loss, since: "Simulation is master and nostalgia, the phantasmal parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials, alone remains".[11]

Thus, the works of the Melbourne painters centred around Store 5 emphasise the sheer materiality and matter-of-fact productivity involved in their repetitious projects, making these an end in themselves. Past events are re-invented as fiction; these new abstractionists consistently create a picture of Modernity that is largely imaginary but parallels the present. The role of alternative artist-run spaces, like Sydney's Inhibodress and, much later, Melbourne's Art Projects, is historically privileged over the critical part played by adventurous commercial galleries like Pinacotheca (exhibiting, for example, Robert Hunter, Dale Hickey, and Robert Rooney) and Tolarno (Ti Parks and Robert Hunter).[12] When Chris McAuliffe analysed one of the first public space exhibitions of the new abstraction, *Proposals*, at the George Paton Gallery in 1989, he pointed out that, contrary to the rhetoric of these artists, not all modernisms were as reductive as that of Le Corbusier. Various strands of early 20th century art reflect a deconstructive contestation of language, while the subject postulated by the new abstraction — "a self-conscious, self-reflexive inmate of the prison-house of language" — duplicates the classic avant-garde position that it intends to subvert.[13] Everywhere, in contemporary abstraction as in hyperreality, one observes the rhetoric of authenticity and proliferating myths of origin. Narelle Jubelin is unique amongst the new abstractionists in her frank acknowledgement of these fantasies. In *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings, 1990-91*, exhibited at the Monash University Gallery's survey, *The Sub.vêr´sive Stitch*, Jubelin embroidered the names of Modernist artists like a litany in fragile *petit-point* lace-work. The preciousness of her frames and fantastic expenditure of labour, like a parody of the economy of Capital, do not trivialise or programmatically subvert; they memorialise these modernist mythologies of

Rod McRae
Core. 1990
oil on canvas
Photo by J. Crossley courtesy Watters Gallery.

origin. Jubelin's nostalgic project tolerates a variety of responses to history, avoiding over-determined foreclosure. Equally, Debra Dawes, through painstaking replication, allows a generalised resemblance to several historical references — Russian Constructivism, Ellsworth Kelly, and De Stijl — recalling Borges' short story where Pierre Menard recreates an exact, loving fragment of *Don Quixote*. Her works represent a considered historical passivity; acknowledging their status as paintings, they engage with the most difficult question facing non-objective artists — how to rehabilitate formalism.

The justification for much of the new abstraction is potentially incompatible to deployment within the scenography of a hyperreal, postmodern present. There is a vast difference between neo-conceptual painting associated with the Mori Gallery in Sydney (artists like Clinton Garofano, Jennifer McCamley and Debra Dawes) and the new abstraction shown at First Draft West and Store 5. Another trajectory, originally associated with the Tony Oliver and Pinacotheca galleries in Melbourne, and Watters in Sydney, is critically marginalised. These artists include Paul Boston, Rod McRae, and Brent Harris; their work is characterised by iconic, symmetrical formats, an elimination of gestural brushwork (shared by the other abstractions described above), and a rhetoric emphasising, often to the point of kitsch, the transcendental and the Sublime.

The theorisation surrounding postmodernism has often been described as hermetic. Non-figurative artists were faced by Theory and its undoubted relevance to institutions and to culture during the Eighties. Like most artists emerging through institutionalised training, which was fairly mandatory from the Seventies onwards, younger artists demonstrated their residual conviction that there was a truth to discover in every discourse — even in one that denied its very existence. Postmodern thought was treated as hermetic content. Because abstract painting has always been predisposed to hermetic subtexts, non-objective artists have been particularly susceptible to a desire to synthesize the two intellectual strands — of modernism and its successor. This pathology differentiates emerging artists' linkage of modernist abstraction to postmodern theory from that of a preceding generation. In a period raised on television and sanctified by Baudrillard, nostalgia assumes a refulgent meaning, since the real, and with it a true history of modernism, has disappeared.

NOTES

(1) This attention includes at least three generous exhibitions: *The Sub.vêr´sive Stitch*, curated with essay by Natalie King, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, September 1991; *Language, Faith and Possibilities*, curated with essay by Rose Lang, 200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne, June 1991; *Abstraction*, curated by Victoria Lynn, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1990. Contrary to the claims of its proponents, the new abstraction is surrounded by a substantial discourse considering the youth of the artists; it is further expanded by numerous reviews in the Melbourne art journal, *Agenda*.

(2) Mike Parr, transcript of discussion, from 'The Role, Function and Limits of Criticism', *The Present and Recent Past of Australian Art and Criticism; Agenda Special Supplement, Agenda* 2, August 1988, pp. 3-8, p. 7.

(3) See Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, Hill & Wang, New York, 1977, p. 148.

(4) Mike Parr, 'Art critic played language games', Letters to the Editor column, *The Age*, 6 August 1991, p. 12.

(5) Kosuth's relevant texts include: Joseph Kosuth, 'Art after Philosophy: Part 2', *Studio International*, Vol. 178, No. 916, November 1969, pp. 160-161.

(6) Meaghan Morris, 'Indigestion: A rhetoric of reviewing', *The Pirate's Fiance: Feminism, Reading, Post-Modernism*, Verso, London, 1988, pp. 105-121, p. 119.

(7) Charles Green, 'Living in the Seventies', catalogue essay for *Off the Wall In the Air: A Seventies Selection*, Monash University Gallery and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, July 1991, pp.4-19.

(8) All interviews were conducted by Stephen Wickham during April-May, 1991. The opinions and quotations of the five artists that appear here are drawn from transcripts and analysis of conversations which appear in Stephen Wickham, 'Abstract Artists of Melbourne: The 1980s', September 1991, unpublished manuscript.

(9) William Rubin (curator and editor), *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, Volumes 1 & 2, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984.

(10) Elisabeth Newman, 'On The Spiritual', *Tension* 20, March 1990, p. 11.

(11) Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', in *Art After Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984, pp. 253-281, p. 280.

(12) In an exemplary presentation of the work and viewpoints of the new abstractionists for *The Sub.vêr´sive Stitch*, curator Natalie King accurately reflects their basically strategic historic perspective.

(13) Chris McAuliffe, 'Proposals', *Agenda* 4, April 1989, pp. 10-11, p. 11.

JOHN NIXON

Studio Sydney 1990

STUDIOS
1980–1990

Studio Brisbane 1980

Studio Melbourne 1982

Studio Melbourne 1983

Studio Melbourne 1984

Studio Melbourne 1985

Studio Lilydale 1985

Studio Lilydale 1986

Studio Brisbane 1989

Ian Burn/Mel Ramsden
Shouting Man (2 of 4 sections), 1975
Poster.

Geoffrey Batchen and Helen Grace

SITUATION–IDENTITIES

an interview with Ian Burn

Ian Burn has been an influential Australian artist, writer and art activist since the mid-60s. After serving an apprenticeship in carpentry and joinery from 1956 to 1960, he attended the National Gallery School of Art in Melbourne for two years, studying with Alan Sumner and then John Brack. He worked briefly with Fred Williams as a picture framer before heading overseas in late 1964, living in England until 1967 and then in New York until 1977. During this period he was a prominent participant in the Conceptual Art movement, exhibiting individually, collaboratively (with Mel Ramsden) and collectively (as Art & Language) throughout Europe and North America. His work was also included in *The Field* exhibition in 1968 at the National Gallery of Victoria. After returning to Australia in 1977, Burn taught for a time at the Power Institute, University of Sydney, and since 1981 has worked as a journalist and graphic artist with Union Media Services in Sydney. He has published regularly since 1969 and in recent years has become an important commentator on Australian art and its history. Two books by Burn are being published this year: *National Life and Landscapes: Australian Painting 1900-1940* (Bay Books) and *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Allen & Unwin). In 1992, the Art Gallery of Western Australia is mounting and touring a survey exhibition entitled *Ian Burn: Minimal and Conceptual Work 1965-1970.*

The following interview was conducted during August and September 1991.

GB: Ian, we appear to be in the midst of a massive re-writing of the history of Conceptual Art. In 1988, *Flash Art* published a special issue on Conceptual Art featuring a series of reminiscences by Conceptual artists. In 1989 the Paris Musée d'Art Modern mounted a large historical exhibition entitled *L'Art Conceptual, une perspective*, which emphasised an American orientation to the movement. The 1990 Biennale of Sydney included an idiosyncratic survey of Conceptual Art, its precedents and offspring. More recently, we have seen the publication of Charles Harrison's *Essays on Art and Language*, a book which provides a peculiarly English perspective on the issues involved. Your work was included in all these projects and has also been featured in recent commercial exhibitions in Europe devoted to works from the Conceptual period. Why is Conceptual Art being revived now, some twenty years after its initial appearance?

IB: After the market for Conceptual Art lapsed in about the mid-70s, much of the work sat around dealers' stockrooms, studios, backsheds, etc. When I returned to Australia in 1977 there was not much interest in the work I brought with me. By the late 80s, however, Conceptual Art could be re-presented as "history" and again marketed, while also serving to advance a range of other professional careers in the visual arts industry. The market operates on many fronts: intellectual attention and commercial interest go hand in hand. Intersecting with that, however, is the fact that the issues raised by Conceptual Art and Minimal Art (as well as Pop Art) haven't gone away as some people had hoped. Questions about the nature of objects and commodities, the protocols of display, the displacement of style, uniqueness, second order practices, the role of theory, the ever-growing institutionality and so on, have kept nagging at a new generation of artists.

GB: In your own statement in *Flash Art* you concluded with a few critical remarks about the role of art history:

> The period is being re-written as 'history' in ways which overlook key elements of the critical space achieved by Conceptual Art art at that moment. It is self-serving, in the interests of the very institutionality against which the art was reacting. It's history repressing politics, which I don't like very much.

Could you comment in more detail on the implications of the present historicisation (and accompanying marketing) of Conceptual Art?

IB: Market attention allows a partial recovery (of ideas, etc.) but also influences the values in terms of which that recovery occurs. The political (and cultural) conservatism of recent times, for example, suggests that current historicising will also be conservative. That's certainly the

case. The re-writing of the history of Conceptual Art is being mediated by the complex agencies of American art, and by American chauvinism generally. A particular brand of Conceptual Art is being stressed above others, privileging certain New York-based work. Underlying the new packaging is an old-fashioned American world-view (which, after the obscenities of the Gulf War, is now being touted as a "new world order"). This "Americanising" of Conceptual Art contradicts the more democratic impulses invoked by the art.

But I wouldn't suggest the original packaging of Conceptual Art was any more honest or authentic. Despite much of the art being conceived in the first instance as already "history", the institutional packaging still happened before anyone was quite prepared for it. So the first "history" was sorted out through opportunism and sheer careerism on the part of some of the artists. Conceptual Art had a very productive "underground" life from about 1966 to 1969, a period when virtually no-one was interested in exhibiting the work (and the artists didn't know it was "Conceptual Art"). It rapidly developed a public profile during 1969-71, when it was defined by museum shows largely in advance of being taken up by commercial galleries. By 1972 Conceptual Art was wrapped up by the market and art institutions: leading (male) players were labelled and possible (critical) strategies were circumscribed by the public form. A wide range of endeavours became reified within a single "style", estranged from those creating the work — and gestures of resistance to this institutionalisation were mere gestures, as marketable as the most flagrant acquiescence. This provoked a crisis for many artists. Within Art & Language at the time we reacted variously — some wanted to withdraw from exhibiting altogether, some decided to withdraw from art altogether, some decided to produce a work which was incomprehensible in market terms (but then comprehensibility never has been a respected market value). Later, other options were canvassed, including different ways of intervening in the institution of art history.

GB: Speaking from that history, what are your views on recent art in Australia which appears to repeat the concerns, aspirations and strategies employed by artists like yourself in the 1960s. What strikes me about this repetition is that it appears in many cases to be blissfully ignorant of its predecessors. I'm thinking here of the work of artists like Debra Dawes, Robert MacPherson, Jacky Redgate, Lindy Lee, Janet Burchill, Jennifer McCamley, and so on...

IB: There are many ways of knowing something. Art historical sensibilities are embodied in any artistic practice, and works of art convey historical understandings unlike those generated as part of a formal or institutional discourse. These different notions of history rarely coincide and more frequently end up in conflict. So — if you can say an artistic practice is informed by certain ideas, can you also say the artists are ignorant of the history of those ideas?

GB: But one assumes that twenty years of history between your work in the 1960s and the work of these recent artists has made a difference. What might this difference be and how does it impact on the potential of contemporary "conceptual art" to produce the kind of critical space you want to claim for the '60s variety?

IB: During the sixties the criticality of a practice was set against the mounting institutionalisation of virtually every aspect of art. Sure, that critical space was utopian. And "masculine". Shot through with contradictions. Despite that — or maybe due to it — for a brief time a critical space seemed within grasp, by working astutely around certain "edges" of the institutions, drawing attention to those edges, at the same time resisting marginalisation. Even if that was partly illusory or a fiction, it did change a few things, hinting at a range of possible "non-mainstream" attitudes. But as institutional practices grew more canny, the edges became less visible and the institutional blanket more pervasive, integrating with the economies of the object. The effect was to dissipate the potential for any critical space within a mainstream, while other practices which had sprung up increasingly found themselves marginalised. Today, notions of criticality are

defined by (and within) institutional discourses; the most you can hope for is to set off a little friction between institutional forms.

But this sort of historical comparison also needs to recognise that the institutional environment in Australia has disenfranchised certain historical understandings. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and for well into the 1980s, public collecting and academic histories were dominated by a taste for "dumb" art and bureaucratically safe aesthetics, meandering between a reactionary Formalism and a decorative Expressionism. In other words, an avoidance of art which demanded any kind of intellectual engagement. (Where for example, are the works by Mondrian in this country, despite his profound influence on so many artists here?)

Paradoxically, the work of artists like the ones you mentioned is now forcing our public collections to acknowledge concerns excluded by the orthodoxy about '60s Australian art. Some museums are trying (belatedly) to rectify this and to back Minimal and Conceptual works. It could be said then that, perhaps unintentionally, some of the recent art in this country is functioning critically in relation to our public institutions, drawing attention to the silences about certain ideas, certain kinds of art. This is a quite different notion of criticality — but then art is being made today under quite different conditions, in a vastly different industry.

In this sense the recent *Perspecta* can be interpreted as an indictment of the collecting policies and taste of the sixties and seventies. Through the works and in the catalogue, there is a conscious invoking of Minimal and Conceptual Art — in other words, the references are to artists scarcely represented in the public collections here, while there are no references to the sort of art that was collected then. It's a familiar story — when French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism were about, our galleries collected academic art; during the various modernist movements, they collected academic art or academic versions of modernism; during American Abstract Expressionism, they got adventurous and collected School of Paris; and throughout the '60s and '70s, they propped up the formalist academy. Even today, some of our public galleries are still investing in a Neo-Expressionist academy.

HG: Given your involvement internationally with Conceptual Art, what influenced your decision to return to Australia in 1977? Why at that point did Australia appeal?

IB: Besides personal reasons, I had after ten years developed a fairly intense distaste for the machinations of the New York art world. Increasingly, New York seemed an unnecessary constraint on the direction of my interests. In addition, while working in a group had in some ways insulated me from many of the New York art world pressures, the working relations within Art & Language had reached a fairly daft state of crisis, where the collective basis simply couldn't go on in the way it had. There were heated disputes over what we were doing in New York and what the other half of Art & Language was doing in England, and then there were ongoing conflicts between those involved in New York, about the character of the work and its direction, about what constituted "work" and its appropriate modes of dissemination; and elements of individual careerism also intensified the general angst. Since the activities of Art & Language were by then fairly much part of the New York scene (that is, it was becoming a commodity like any other in New York), the impasse meant that I would have had to sort out a different relation to New York. By then, I guess I had little enthusiasm for that.

Also — as I became involved in broader cultural politics, I found I had an intense feeling of alienation from American political culture, from what was (and is) politically possible there. By that time, a fairly scathing critique of centrist institutions and practices had been developed and taken about as far as it could in New York. The problem was that not only was New York dominating the international art scene, but it was in effect also monopolising the critique of itself, which effectively silenced the critiques from "outside" New York. I know we're all caught in contradictions in our lives — but, on a

personal level, I suppose this particular contradiction had become intolerable. At the same time, I was also at a point of wanting to sort out a different relation to "Australia" and was beginning to work through these ideas around historical modes of artistic development. Some of the ideas in the book just published on traditional landscape painting in Australia were first toyed with in New York and while teaching in San Diego and Halifax. Curiously, it was the close and detailed critique I wrote with Karl Beveridge (published in *The Fox*, No. 2, 1975) about Donald Judd's Minimal Art and writings which effected a critical distancing, giving me space to begin to work with some of these ideas.

HG: In much of your polemical writing during the '70s, there's a strong critique of the idea of international art and the way in which this has come to mean, on the whole, American art...

IB: While the equation of "American" with "international" might seem to have abated, it's still very influential through the PR surrounding American art. Only recently I was looking at Irving Sandler's 1988 book *American Art in the Sixties* — more than 400 pages of it — which refers to most well-known non-American artits but privileges American partipants in every aspect of work. In this book, the melee of ideas and styles is suddenly nationalised, Americanised — other people's ideas are subsumed and "American art" becomes the all *inclusive* category for the 60s. Artists from other places are slotted in as supporting players. Yes, American art was hegemonic during the 60s, but to reduce *everything* to that category distorts history even further.

It's illuminating however to compare Sandler's book to, say, Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting*, including the recent Smith-plus-one edition. If a work wasn't physically produced on Australian soil then it's not really "Australian" and can't be talked about. Nor can the work produced by artists visiting Australia be talked about (except Christo's work, which I've never been able to take seriously). Australian art is upheld as an *exclusive* category, not an inclusive one — and wilfully excluded is much which could help people understand the art. Interestingly, William Moore's earlier history treated Australian art in a far more inclusive fashion. It seems that the recasting of the history within a more dependent framework induces a more exclusive definition (and makes a mockery of the decision, 30 years on, to update and republish Smith's — a decision seemingly based on market factors, good for OUP, not for the good of Australian art). I find it perverse that now — in the 1990s — we're still faced with the issue of why "Australian art" remains resolutely an exclusive category!

HG: But in your critique of internationalism, Greenberg becomes a particular figure for attack, even ridicule. To what extent was your criticism of Greenberg an issue brought back to Australia with you and to what extent were you responding to the climate here in mid-70s in which Greenberg was still, in some quarters, a major figure? Retrospectively, do you see any continuities between your own early practice (eg. in its "absolute abstraction") and some of the principles which Greenberg espoused?

IB: Greenberg's ideas were briefly attractive (particularly as they were filtered through the paintings of Louis and Noland) but he discounted most of the artists I found interesting. The work of artists like Johns, Rauschenberg, Warhol, etc, was dismissed as "novelty art" by Greenberg, but ironically many of the artists he supported have ended up as historical jokes. In the 1930s Greenberg wrote some acute essays about kitsch and about collage, but the later dross about flatness, quality and the "objectivity" of taste (*his taste)* wasn't persuasive for very long. Michael Fried's writing was of more interest, especially his close analysis of Frank Stella's early work. The sort of art I was producing was more aligned with early Minimalism and was not abstraction in the sense of Greenberg's Modernist paradigm. Minimalism was about animating "real" space and "real" time, and was regarded then as a new kind of "realism" — in fact, in 1968 the Museum of Modern Art in New York organised a show largely of Minimalism which was titled 'The Art of the Real'. Minimalism requires viewing in a different way — we may be fascinated by the spectacle (hi tech, abstract) of

the surfaces, but our perception does not qualify the object in the way which happens with Formalist art. Minimal Art leads to a subversion of abstraction, of non-representation... as evidenced in the development of Conceptual Art, especially in the way certain work incorporated representational imagery.

I hadn't thought much about Greenberg for some years until I returned to Australia. I was surprised at the aspects of Greenberg still taken seriously. By the mid-60s there had been a fairly volatile split within what was then mainstream art, between the Formalist academy (over which Greenberg held sway) and the Minimalist camp (which invoked a diverse range of artists like Duchamp, Reinhardt, Cage, Johns, Warhol, etc). The division was absolute, there was no way you could have a foot in each camp. But, in places away from the mainstream "centre", artists often drew ideas from both sources, the influences seemingly undifferentiated. In Australia, bits of Minimalism seeped in but the stronger attraction was towards a Greenbergian Formalism. The point about Minimalism was that it presupposed a particular stage of institutionalisation within the art industry (of museums and administration, curating and art history, publishing and art criticism, etc). That was well advanced in New York by the early '60s, but in Australia it was then only in a very early phase — in fact, the entrepreneurial role of museums in relation to contemporary art didn't emerge until the mid-70s. For instance, Mel Ramsden and I approached the AGNSW in the early '70s proposing a small survey show of our Conceptual work and the Gallery wrote back saying such shows were against its policy. But the point I'm making is that, in places like Australia, the institutional conditions didn't exist at that time for a developed understanding or articulatuion of ideas within a Minimalist frame. I think Greenberg understood that and used the situation for some fairly blatant marketing.

HG: Fred Orton wrote in 1983 that "Art & Language assumed from way back that universalising claims were all out. The job was to address the contingent and to treat the production of art or a second-order discourse as contingent". Do you think that your work in the last fifteen years might be seen as a continuation of some of the Art & Language concerns (eg. the point about contingency), although the direction you might have taken has been markedly different from that chosen by others of Art & Language (particularly Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden and Terry Atkinson)?

IB: What you call the concerns of Art & Language were simply an extension of the concerns of the individuals participating under the collective banner. I don't have a sense of "corporatised" concerns apart from that. I dragged a whole bunch of ideas and baggage with me into Art & Language, which were jossled around and changed in that context; then I dragged out those and a lot more when I came back to Australia. I have a strong sense of the continuity and evolution of those ideas — and the contingency of those concerns.

GB: I've always been struck by the way it is possible to locate your work within an artistic lineage peculiar to Melbourne. Your persistent concern with perception and notions of picture-making seems, for example, to continue the interests of earlier artists like Fred Williams, John Brack, Sidney Nolan and Max Meldrum, and through them the academic training methods at the National Gallery School. Meldrum is a particularly interesting precedent in this regard, with his abstracted tonal pictures and his emphasis on a close phenomenological analysis of what is seen. I know you acquired a copy of Meldrum's 1950 book *The Science of Appearances* quite early and even built one of the optical apparatuses that he recommended. Indeed, there is a superficial similarity between your 1968 series of *Systematically Altered Photographs* and Meldrum's Chromatic Analysis diagrams from his book. However, it is Meldrum's obsessive Formalism that seems a clear precursor to your own art practice. Could you comment on this, and to what extent have you consciously worked through the art of your Melbourne peers?

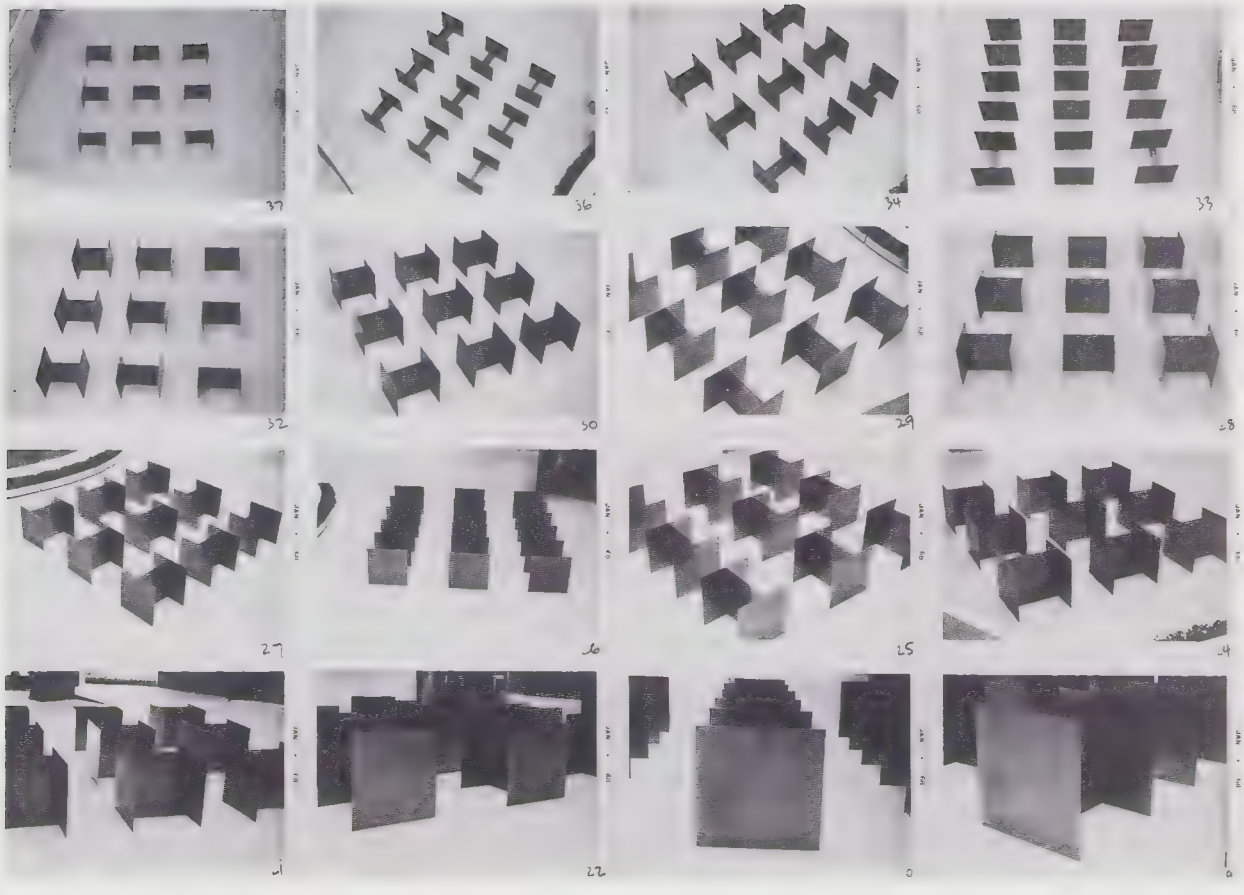
IB: Meldrum's "obsessive Formalism"? I would have said that Meldrum analysed perception into basic formal characteristics in order to create the (optical) illusion of

objects in space on a two-dimensional surface — which is not really how I think of Formalism. But, yes, I've found much of interest in Meldrum's ideas — especially his conceptualisation of the practice of painting, as well as his consistent political stance. The ideas, the conceptualisation, the detachment, his strategies to suspend or delay recognition of objects, the exercises relating to perception and the quirky practical apparatus he proposed, have all ended up as part of my baggage as an artist though I never actually produced paintings like Meldrum. I was attracted to Meldrum's ideas before I went to art school, where he was scorned by everyone — but later on bits kept returning, in the oddest ways, occassionally giving my art a quite specific (ironic?) reference but also forcing a different appreciation of Meldrum's ideas.

That, if you like, is how contingency works... it's the point where (in my development) Meldrum stumbles into Minimalism. Meldrum had a highly pragmatic rationalist approach, which he pursued to a point of irrationality, giving the ideas a different kind of interest. That rationalism has parallels with some American art of the 1920s and 1930s, which also provided reference for a certain Minimalist work. But a stronger connection was with Meldrum's emphasis on perception and its "scientific" analysis, a particular kind of perception. The vision he was talking about was phenomenologically based. In the mid-60s, when my art was concerned largely with perceptual experience and how that might be made more self-conscious and reflexive — and I was reading bits of Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and others on phenomenology — some of Meldrum's ideas didn't seem so far away. The work of art was not regarded as a thing-in-itself, but was what it appeared to be in the experience of the viewer. Meldrum said he was not teaching people to paint but teaching them to see, and this was based on an "everyday" sort of seeing. Minimalism and Conceptual Art — probably from Jasper Johns on — was based on very "ordinary" kinds of perception and an ability to analyse those experiences in a detached manner. We can see this aspect of Meldrum's art extended through the work of Fred Williams who had studied with William Dargie, a follower of Meldrum. Williams' landscapes of the '60s don't just have a Minimalist "look", they also tend to operate visually in such terms. It may be just coincidental, but now, when a number of artists are exploring ideas through Minimalism and Conceptualist frames, we are also beginning to see a rehabilitation of Meldrum.

More generally though, I wasn't working through an Australian background, it was always something that was simply there. But it was also something I never felt inclined to suppress. With hindsight, it strikes me it was quite useful baggage... the phenomenological orientation of Meldrum's perception and conceptualisation of the practice of painting, the potency of irony as a practical methodology which I liked in Nolan's early work, the irony and conceptual detachment of Brack, the phenomenological vision and surfaces of Williams, and so on. This formed part of my resources (along with Leger, Mondrian, Johns, Reinhardt, Stella, etc), and was continuous with the Conceptual work I was producing. At the same time, those Australian references were something I had to try to make sense of in relation to the work I was then doing, because none of the conceptual frameworks available to me could account for that sort of contingency. Certainly the prevailing art-historical models weren't any use. This probably explains in part why "Australia" kept re-entering my work during the thirteen years working in London and New York: it was there not as some exotic antipodean subject matter, but as the only way I had of trying out certain (theoretical) relationships.

The question of how we understand (and write about) the art produced in Australia is the same question of how we position Australain art in an international context. Historically, works of art have embodied far more sophisticated answers than those which have come out of academia. However, some of the recent post-colonial writing by people like Homi Bhabha propose theoretical tools better able to cope with the complexity of cultural response and may be adapted to a historical situation like that of Australia. These proposals open up other ways of discussing and analysing the relations and nuances around



Ian Burn
Photographic Mirror (Robert Morris)(Model), 1967-68
16 photographs mounted

influence, attitudes to authority, and so on.

GB: Your writing over the last decade has consistently argued for the cultural specificity of Australian art, even for all that seemingly Americanised work shown in *The Field* exhibition in 1968. How do you view yourself in these terms? Mel Ramsden has written that during the 60s Ian Burn was "psychologically imprisoned between his sense of his origins and cosmopolitanism". Ramsden could be thinking of one of the works you did together, *Soft-Tape* (1966), which was recently reconstructed for the 1990 Biennale of Sydney. You speak of this work in the Biennale catalogue as being about the "moment when geometry becomes fused (confused?) with geography". In some ways this could describe the interaction of the viewer/listener and the space/sound within the actual installation. But are you also speaking here of a distancing or spacing between the place of its conception (London) and the place of its intended exhibition (Melbourne)? In what ways is "Australia" figured in *Soft-Tape*?

IB: Soft-Tape was conceived for exhibition in Melbourne and was about how to make a context of ideas explicit, even if not available. For me (it was slightly different for Mel), *Soft-Tape* attempted to give form to the problem of the translation or transvaluation of ideas when communicated across a cultural distance, between different contexts. The rhetorical slippage between "geometry" and "geography" served as a metaphor for that problem — geometry invoking "pure" concerns with space, which presumes a *universal* reference, against geography which proposes the *specificity* of place. If, as we were thinking about it then, communication is importantly a spatial problem, then that spatiality isn't abstract — in other words, the slippage between geometry and geography becomes a vital aspect of its meaning.

For both Mel and myself, it was an odd work to have conceived just at that point, prompted by thinking about exhibiting in Australia as a problematic in itself. It represented an ontological shift in our practices, which led to a sort of epistemological rupture. As a work, it was fairly crude, even blunt, but in may ways it served as an archetype for a number of subsequent works and "exhibitions".

HG: In the important recent show *Off The Wall / In the Air, A Seventies Selection*, at the Monash University Gallery, a collaborative work with Mel Ramsden, titled *Shouting Man*, was exhibited. The piece was first shown in an art fair in Germany in 1975, so that a certain audience was presumed. In looking at the work fifteen years later, a continuity could appear between its polemical concerns and the work you have subsequently done in the union movement. It's as if the work quite specifically points in that direction. The "shouting" which the man does might seem to be directed in some sense towards the art world and, at the same time, it is almost as if the artists in this case are answering the shouting man's call from a place outside of that. However, the slogans still fall on deaf ears when shouted from within the arts community. If you remove the words does the work lose any of its effect, ultimately? It seems at the moment that there is, for you and a number of others who have been working in different ways, a renewed interest in the art world, and yet a work like *Shouting Man* still suggests the final impossibility of that engagement. Can you comment on this?

IB: For the section of this work shown in Cologne in 1975 we adopted a fairly aggressive (ie. abusive) mode of address, about how "the New York art spectacle loves controversy, it buys controversy, it sells controversy... Shit, it's all masochistic, living in New York: we congratulate ourselves as 'moral', we raise our fists as 'rebels', we lament our conditions as 'workers' (for crying out loud), blue-jeaned bodies, hammer in one hand, sickle in the other, clawing our fucking way to the top... Move away, never move here at all — you still drown in the international market, ripples of bloated culture, shit, it's all masochistic", and so on. This is language intended (hopefully) to corrode the institutionality of the New York art world, while confronting the reality that abuse may well be the only weapon left.

The dealer exhibiting the work was a little upset by the fairly desperate language and also the problems of

translating the text, so we produced a more polite version which still ended up not being translated. This text was about

> "indexicality as a kind of anarchistic device busting up the hegemony of commodity language. If 'talk' is indexical — 'unique' to a particular time and place — then we have a deliberate epistemological contradiction in respect to translation from one context to another [and so our 'talk'] is difficult to treat 'universally', to turn into an object of contemplation... Our languag(ing) is tied to contradictions which are concretised in the asylum of group (A & L NY) indexicality, which is the only real space we've got — such contradictions should be pushed to the limits, more and more..."

This text is more "philosophical", yet — what happens when you *shout* rather than speak a text like that?

At the time we were experimenting with different modes (and tones) of speech. Other works, including a number of songs, also adopted the form of a harangue. The shouting posters were like a visual rendering of an harangue and, yes, any text could be used as the image invokes the tone of voice. That was intentional. The shouting of "content" also becomes the voiding of content, is about the impossibility of artists reclaiming "direct speech", of speech which is not mediated or resonating with echoes of the institutional frame. This was not about the loss of "authenticity" becoming a topic or subject-matter of the art, but rather of the impossibility of authenticity in the first place. The language is ironical, but self-deprecating irony when you feel you've got nowhere else to go — a far cry from notions of the integrity of abstract painting as the basis for an ethical future.

There was, about then, a utopian hope that one might be able to resolve certain contradictions politically, but of course there are just as many contradictions in political action, and just as many compromises. However, such politics influenced the form of this and other work, despite the irony of "content". The posters were made for single use, pasted directly onto the wall, as if the gallery were a street. We wanted something which left as little commercial residue as possible yet could exploit the high theatre of an internatonal art fair. Of course, such actions have only momentary effect since, ultimately, all transgressions of the commodity are accountable for in terms of the "logic" of the commodity itself.

HG: Since the late '70s, you have been actively involved in the Artworkers Union and since the early '80s you've been working in graphic design and media production for the union movement. You have also supported the development of the Australia Council's Art & Working Life program, an extremely interesting set of practices which has perhaps attracted more media attention in Parliament than it has in the art world or from the union movement. The principles of this policy are of far-reaching significance in our considerations of culture in this country, although the practice itself has often been problematic. Why have you chosen to concentrate your energies within the trade union movement in recent years?

IB: There are many ways of working as an artist. When I write I don't think of myself as an art historian or critic or journalist. There are also endless contexts in which to work. The "political art" which evolved out of certain Conceptual Art always talked about the need to engage other audiences, but generally it was only ever talk. The Art & Working Life program has a strength and vitality because it *does* engage another audience... and the art produced with unions gets used in quite different ways. While such work has particular strengths and limitations, it also allows you particular insights and a critical purchase on the limitations of mainstream practices.

Like it or not, the arts are moving ever closer to a "totally administered" industry and the tendency increasingly is to create an institutional enclave based around certain mainstream practices, largely immune to criticisms of its exclusivity and unresponsiveness to other kinds of practice. Maybe this is inevitable in "advanced" societies. Nonetheless it should be resisted, vigorously, and there are always pockets of people within institutional

life prepared to fight for democratic policies and a genuine diversity within the culture — people like, for instance, Deborah Mills who initiated the union-based arts program as an Australia Council policy. Ironically, it is the institutionalisation of a program like Art & Working Life which, ultimately, becomes its greatest protection against political attack. The point is that a culture is only ever as strong as the diversity of its artistic practices... and only as rich as the multiplicity of meanings evoked by these practices.

HG: Art & Working Life seems to propose a rejection of both high cultural values, on the grounds of its elitism, and of mass culture on the grounds of its consumerist (and American) orientation. In its place, an authentic working-class culture seems to be proposed, one which also has a particular national character. Isn't this a romantic, almost nostalgic leaning towards a past which may never have existed?

IB: Well, I don't think anyone is really proposing an "authentic working-class culture". Admittedly bits of the promotional material read that way and there's always a slight danger of the program becoming trapped in a dated rhetoric. But the nature of the work is new, it doesn't have a developed (critical) vocabulary, it often doesn't have an effective dissemination, and it has met with considerable resistance and suspicion from the art institutions as well as the union institutions. Then, on top of that is the more general problem of how, in any aspect of culture today, one begins to define notions of "difference".

The point is that a key reason artists decide to work with trade unions is that it represents something *different* from the mainstream cultural practices. It is a way of working which demands different models of practice and results in a different kind of art. But this difference isn't inherited from some romantic labour past, as you suggest. A difference has to be *produced* — and be continually produced — in order for the artistic practices to evolve. But on what basis do you define that difference? Okay, the question of social class comes into it on important levels, and of labour relations and radical traditions in visual culture; but the art also doesn't appear in isolation from mainstream practices but is involved in a considerable interchange, a to-and-fro process. We may tend to think about the art in terms of socio-political issues rather than in terms of art-for-art's-sake but these aren't as exclusive as many assume. What is vital is the interchange of ideas and forms. And a selection of work produced during the last ten years does show a remarkably strong body of work, especially by artists such as Birgitte Hansen, Annie Newmarch, and others. In talking of the quality of work in the program, what is immediately striking is the predominance of women artists. In the past this would have been taken as a sign of the marginality of this area of work. Yet within mainstream practice over the past (say) five years, the strongest and most interesting work has been produced largely by women — artists like Narelle Jubelin, Sue Norrie, Simone Mangos, Anne Zahalka, Fiona Hall, Jacky Redgate, Pat Brassington, and others. This represents an enormous shift from the '60s when women were virtually shut out of both hardware and software styles. And the Art & Working Life program is evidence of a similar shift from past attitudes about the role of the arts in society, and on funding and support for the arts.

HG: But aren't there also some useful qualities to be drawn from mass culture (or popular culture, as a number of critics would now prefer to call it)? In the disdain for certain aspects of mass or popular culture, is there not a trace of Greenberg's own distaste for popularisation? Notwithstanding the criticisms which might be made of the global ambitions of mass culture (criticisms which the art world still seems reluctant to make), isn't it the case that popular cultural forms lend themselves to particular local appropriations and transformations?

IB: That's the Schwarzenegger one hundred million dollar question... the point is that some popular cultural forms (like art styles) lend themselves to transformation, while some just don't. A problem is, though, when many artists talk about mass or popular culture, they implicitly mean American pop culture, and from at least several decades ago, generally what was legitimated by American

Pop Art. The cultural and temporal distance seems to make it more pervasive and more powerful... as if there's an unspoken belief that the 1940s and 1950s produced a more "authentic" popular culture.

But the larger issue I think is that the old dichotomy of "elite" and "mass" is losing much of its explanatory power. The "elite" arts are now rigid institutions and increasingly subjected to new forms of accountability, to be assessed within government accounting and statistics. It is fairly obvious that the theatricality of so much art today has increased its entertainment value, whether we like it or not, and for example well over a million people per year now visit each of the larger State galleries. The arts are now projected as popular spectacle through all forms of the mass media. At a practical level the distinction between elite and mass doesn't help much — but the distinction only dissolves because elite and mass are, in the first instance, both abstract concepts of audiences. They are particular concepts of consumer marketing, affecting production and projected into and through the work itself. In contrast, the dominant contradictions experienced by artists today emerge, I believe, more from the institutionality of the culture, and what if any space for practice exists outside the institutional forms. Can there be such a thing as a non-institutionalised practice? It's a serious question today whether art any longer exists in its own right, or whether it exists only as a fiction of the institutions. Is the "art" of being an artist simply to invent work which convincingly extends that fiction? Has style become just a mask behind which the artist is allowed to grimace... which no-one sees?

Ultimately, this condition of institutionality may be more invidious. Increasingly it's a fact of life and artists are again being forced into new strategies. As the cultural products of different countries re-align towards even greater conformity, the differences are increasingly expressed in the *silences* within cultures. But how do we read the silences? Of course, *we* should never be silent in the face of institutions, that's when we should be shouting — but we should also be listening for what does become silent! For me, the most interesting art today is work which makes us conscious of those silences.

Milan Knizak
From *Aktual Walk*, 1964
Prague.

Marian Dzurik and Ann Stephen

FROM BOHEMIA AND THE TATRAS — A HIDDEN AVANT-GARDE

unofficial art before and after the Prague spring

This article focuses on the avant-garde practices amongst several formerly unofficial artists in Czechoslovakia during the 1960's and 1970's. Their contemporary work will form the basis of an exhibition to be held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1993.

The differences between our countries are profound, as any migrant from Central Europe knows: Old world/New world; Slavic/Anglo; East/West. While folkloric traditions are frequently invoked to represent these exile communities, their contemporary visual arts remain largely unknown in Australia. Their former location, behind the "iron curtain", kept them off the beaten track of the likes of Biennale directors and a repressive system of unofficial and official art ensured that access remained restricted.

The new perspectives created by the end of the Cold War have allowed us to recognise that, amongst other things, there is something comparable in our cultural relations, that of being at the margins of major metropolitan centres. This article draws out some common elements which may provide us with a sense of being more than simply voyeurs caught up watching a previously concealed culture exposed to "free market" forces.

SETTING THE SCENE

Through the sixties, aspects of east European and Soviet art became the subject of increasing attention from the West. This interest was directed towards early twentieth-century Constructivism and artists like Malevich, Rodchenko, Kupka, Kandinsky, El Lissitsky, Tatlin, as an alternative to the formalist history of modernism. These explorations were to eventually break apart the Cold War vision which had for thirty years suppressed the history of cultural interactions across the political divisions between East and West. But through those thirty years the contemporary visual arts from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union continued to remain obscure.

The revolutions of 1968 from China, Chile, Paris to Prague were read in the West as "the beginning of the end", but little attention was addressed to the cultural practices before and after such dramatic events as the Prague Spring. It is only due to perestroika that these unofficial visual arts practices are now becoming accessible.

An exception was Czech Jiri Kolar whose reputation spread internationally in the mid 60's. His collages combine high culture with the mass culture sources of Pop Art, yet his work is never disengaged from its own materiality in the way of a Warhol (who, as an American-born child of migrants from Czechoslovakia, did not carry such cultural baggage). Through such work as his *Diary of 1968*, Kolar came to represent to the West the unofficial arts of Czechoslovakia.

It is therefore not surprising that Bernard Smith, while acting as the curator for the Power Bequest, acquired from Kassel Documenta a large Kolar work. He later reflected: "It seemed that 1968 should not pass without the Power Gallery making a few purchases of the avant-garde art of Czechoslovakia".[1] The work titled *Antropodiak — Homage a Larousse* is a monumental collage comprising of fragments torn from a nineteenth-century encyclopaedia and then re-ordered. The engraved images, released from their illustrative function within the text, are rolled into a central globe of free associations, surrounded by a sea of fragmentary words. In "replacing the encompasing literary order with a relativistic simultaneity of vision", the curator Linda Michael suggests that there is an implied "anti-chronology which refers to the past and the future through an eternal present".[2]

Kolar's play with language and the culture of the book also echoes back and forward in terms of an interdisciplinary tradition particularly strong in the Prague avant-garde. Yet Kolar's processes of making are more akin to the craft of painting than to a tradition of the ready-made, the source for some of the most interesting artists in contemporary Czech and Slovak art. Mapping this alternative tradition involves a circuitous path, tracing how

elements of the art worlds of North America and Western Europe touched Czechoslovakia. Pop Art and its precursors, such as Rauschenberg (who had a strong European impact, being the first artist to win the Jury Prize at the Venice Biennale), figure in this equation, as do other Neo-Dada and Conceptual strands.

For the unofficial avant-garde, the work of art as a marketable product barely existed. The Czech art historian, Jindrich Chalupecky, suggests that as a consequence such work was underwritten by idealism , by a "mission to change the consciousness of people, their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, desires".[3]

The following artists are major figures today, but their work was by no means representative of the unofficial art world of the period, as forms of Expressionism and Surrealism dominated alongside a hybrid of abstract painting and sculpture. Rather, we have chosen to group together work that invokes a capacity to critically engage the social, yet with a sometimes gentle, sometimes quite absurdist wit seldom evident in oppositional cultures. In contrast, the formerly unofficial Expressionism and abstraction remain locked within their introspective and more traditional forms.

PRAGUE AKTIONS

Several years of "thaw" preceded the Prague Spring of 1968 and this liberalisation in the early sixties allowed some artists to develop practices that broke through an art community that was structured by a rigid separation between the official (public) and unofficial (private). Milan Knizak's early career exploited this moment and, with his collaborators Sona Svecova, Jan Mach, Jan Trtilek and Vit Mach — sometimes known as the Aktual Group — he startled the inhabitants of an old working class suburb of Prague with a series of "aktions". *Demonstration for all the Senses* of 1964 took place in the everyday world of these cobblestoned streets and involved a displacement of the ordinary:

> The organisers of the demonstration wear unusual clothes instead of jewels — articles of daily use or pieces of fancy material sewn on ordinary clothing... Walking down the street they pass a room with an open window, near which a man sits at a table and eats... They encounter things — parts of furniture, clothes, etc. A musician lies on the ground and plays a violin. Now they walk back. A man stands at a wall, glazing a window. As soon as he is finished, he breaks it.[4]

Sona Svecova's work from *Two Unperformed Demonstrations* was set amongst the anonymous world of public transport, which it sought to gently disorder (in a way not dissimilar to Barry Humphries' early Dada performances):

> I am on a tram.
> The tram is crowded with people.
> I am smartly dressed, nicely coiffed and made up, so that I create the impression of being a lady.
> After ten minutes, I suddenly ask the people standing near me to please make room. I place a little white rag, about 50 centimetres square, on the ground and stand on it, after removing my shoes. From my luxurious beaded handbag I take shoe-polish, a brush and a rag.
> I polish my shoes nicely and then put the equipment back into my handbag without saying a word, and proceed calmly to my destination. Or, if anyone asks me what I am doing, I politely offer the shoe-polishing materials.[5]

In making such passages through urban space there are echoes of the Situationists' "walks" of the late 1950's, which rejected the grid of the city and its rational order for a random, drifting exploration calculated to disrupt the habits of the passive spectator. But while the Situationists' psycho-geographic explorations of Paris produced a vast, perpetually changing labyrinth designed for free play, the environment of Prague was not yet a "society of the spectacle". Their acts were organised by and played on the immediate social landscape, mixing elements of bohemian and working-class cultures.

For instance, an all-day event in 1965, *Second Manifestation of Aktual Art*, began with a large lecture by Milan Knizak entitled 'Second Atomic Explosion in China and its Influence on Development in Art':

> From a large monographic volume of Renaissance art, he tears out pages and distributes them to the participants. Pictures and books piled up on the ground are destroyed... The crowd of participants is then led through the street to a high wall on which hang household items: bed, table, chair, stove, etc. A mass of multi-coloured clothes is scattered over the space at the wall... About seventy participants enter through a long dark narrow hallway into a room approximately 4.5 x 4 metres, filled with the cleared-away objects. They are crowded among the fantastic amount of accumulated junk which tears their clothes. A concert of active music is announced. The room is filled with the monotonous din of an untuned radio. A scratchy and sticky record is played on the phonograph. It breaks, then its individual parts played. The participants scrape the record and on their own volition they start to create their own music with anything and on anything they find around them... Noise enough to drive anybody insane. Enough! Everybody out! The organisers chase the participants out...
>
> They depart again to the open space near the high wall where the third issue of *Aktual Art* magazine is being prepared. All of them are creators. Sheets of paper and paints fly to the participants. A package of soppy wet soiled stained papers is dedicated to the newly elected beauty queen. It is a ten year old girl. She is afraid. She refuses to take it. She presses closer to her mother. Therefore another one must be elected. They walk back to house No. 19. The basement door is open.
>
> A girl with a box pushes through and sells carnival fortunes: 'Call such-and-such a telephone number', 'Discuss the theme of Mona Lisa's smile, the futility of art, the theme of sexual excretion and its influence on marriage, the theme of death and art', etc, etc.
>
> Then several shots from guns, people come out and at the entrance each one receives a hot potato boiled in the jacket. Photographs from Terezin ghetto. The participants stand around in front of the house and with great relish devour their potato which is a substitute for Sunday dinner. The police supervise everything — uniformed and civilian — watchfully following every action. Therefore a break and, in ten minutes, meet in front of the Hotel Savoy. To get rid of the depressing feeling of being watched...[6]

In 1966 these back-street "walks" became visible to an English-speaking audience through Alan Kaprow's book *Assemblage Events & Happenings*. When a description of *Manifestation* was published in *Studio International* that year, it was favourably compared to the New York Happenings of Rauschenberg, Dine and Oldenberg, which were criticised for having "lost much of their spontaneity and having become formalised into sequences reminiscent of vaudeville".[7] The Prague "aktions", in occupying the public spaces of the streets, drew their material from the everyday. *Studio* commented that in Prague "they also had evident, if ambiguous, political overtones".[8] From the perspective of the official art world of Czechoslovakia the outrage was that serious concerns of the state like Terezin and an atomic test were juxtaposed with the banal and absurd.

Knizak shows about as much respect for conventional aesthetic disciplines as the Dadaists moving between paintings, constructions, furniture, sound ("broken music"), jewellery, clothing and books. Informing these projects is a belief in process: "All of these things are merely traces, the dust and scrapes of a struggle that should never cease".[9] A struggle that suggests comparison with the Russian Absurdists of the 1920's and 1930's who, through performances and texts based on shock and disjointed elements drawn from everyday life and folk culture, challenged their own official "proletarian" culture.[10]

Take his books produced over the last three decades that "are collections of documents that I had no opportunity to publish back then". Bound in a diverse range of covers, some violently sealed with wire, others closed by heat or some, in wild extravagence, sprouting jesters' horns, they are like archaelogical evidence from a language sealed off; they cannot be read.

The invasion in August 1968 found Knizak in the United States, where he had organised two actions, *Lying Ceremony* and *Difficult Ceremony*. They re-enacted the desolation of being separated from his own culture and set adrift in the New York art world — a familiar enough response by artists from regional art worlds, athough his experience of isolation was heightened by the suppression of the Prague Spring. He was to return home in 1970 against the general pattern of migration from Czechoslovakia at the time.

Another Czech artist who made public "aktions" in these difficult years was Zorka Saglova. The focus of her work was different as she played upon and incorporated elements of nature and the rural landscape rather than the urban environments of Knizak and the Aktual group.

In 1969 her work *Hay-Straw* occupied a major Prague gallery with bundles of green hay and yellow straw. She used these "non-art" agricultural materials and actions, the grass being turned, mixed, raked and dried over the duration of the exhibitiion by the artist and any participating visitors. For this action she was cast into the limbo of unofficial art.

In 1970 she paid *Homage to Gustav Oberman* in a work that took place at night in a snow field:

> She and her friends lit nineteen huge fires spaced in a circle a hundred metres in diameter... The Oberman in whose homage the event held was, they say, a cobbler who used to walk through the fields spitting balls of fire; but this forerunner of fire-land-art was little appreciated and was beaten up for his pains.[11]

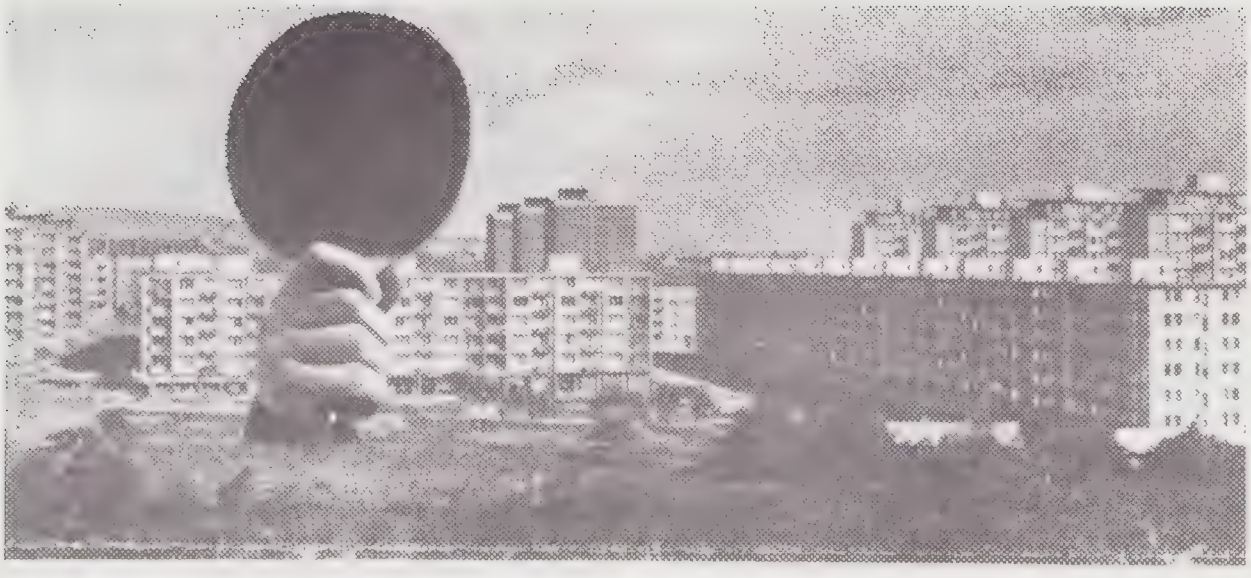
Another nocturnal action involved laying cloth nappies across a rural landscape, re-enacting a legendary act of the Hussites associated with the region, which told of women tripping the enemy cavalry by such feminine "weapons". In these illicit works, there is a sense of re-enacting moments of liberation that adhere in popular memory. There is a feminine touch to all her work which does not seek to inscribe or monumentalise human presence onto the land like much American environment art, but invokes the folk stories of particular landscapes through temporary effects.

A TATRA AVANT-GARDE

In Slovakia, historically the more isolated of the two republics and confined between the intractable Tatra mountains and the Danube lowlands, there was no local tradition of a cosmopolitan avant-garde such as had existed in Prague in the early twentieth-century. In the mid-60's several young artists turned to Duchamp for inspiration and evolved practices which assumed a strongly resistant character in the face of the repressive regime. For instance, Julius Koller, a major Slovak Conceptualist, used the ready-made as auto-biography: "I described one year of my life as a ready-made — that was the year of my conscripted military service".

In Bratislava, the capital of the Slovak republic, the unofficial art world evolved as a close-knit scene, with the more conceptually orientated artists working at times collaboratively, in a group known as "Co-operate Together". The modest scale of much of this work reflects their domestic rather than gallery and studio spaces, with a small audience consisting largely of fellow artists and friends.

In the early sixties, Julius Koller had painted urban landscapes, but under the influence of recent American art he set about doing Lichtenstein-style versions of the Tatra mountains based upon popular postcard views. In 1968 he seized upon a regional form of the "found object". On a mass-produced canvas runner commonly laid on domestic corridors he painted in Slovak the words "1968 Official



Julius Koller
Ping-Pong Monument, Bratislava, 1971
Collage.

Art POPular format" and signed it. The bold striped colours in this context recalled American colour-field painting. The runner was placed at the entrance to his unofficial exhibitions, which were held in informal spaces such as workers' clubs, inviting a confusion of uses (something reminiscent of that discomforting floor piece installed by Ian Millis in 1973).

In response to the Soviet invasion, Koller adopted as a form of personal identity the question mark. Over the following two decades he inscribed the sign onto a variety of found objects. For instance, through montage, which transformed decoration into question marks, he plunged an icon of picturesque Slovak folk culture, the painted house, into ontological uncertainty.

Another recurring motif developed by Koller at this time came fom an urban recreation, the game of ping pong. In montage and installation work it became a metaphor for "free" play. Like the Situationists, he sought an order which would permit fully free activity, to release a sense of play within everyday life:

> My last installation in a gallery for twenty years was called *The Ping Pong Club of Julius Koller* where, over a month, the visitor could participate in a game of ping pong and thus change themselves into an artspace. This space symbolised the possibility and necessity not just of free play but also of communication. Being forbidden and excluded from the rules of the game in the following years, we were left behind.[12]

Koller's colleague and sometime collaborator Stano Filko in the mid-60's had also moved from painted assemblages to environments, whilst continuing to present some ideas in graphic form. His early wall pieces were densely worked surfaces, whose shapes echoed orthodox eastern icons but were violated by a collage of mass media and porn.

By 1966 Filko had moved into a far cooler style of installation. One of these works was featured in *Studio International*. Entitled *Universal Environment*, its imagery was Futurist "*Barbarella*-style" as it sought to heighten sensory perceptions:

> 1. At the entrance into the environment a visitor may weigh and measure his own body and thus get some knowledge about himself at least from the physical point of view...
>
> 5. On a pneumatic bed, where a woman is painted (also by anti-manual technique) a visitor can sit down, lie down, have a rest, contemplate or listen to the radio, whichever he may choose. The visitor in an environment full of other artefacts becomes a live statue.[13]

However, these techno-Futurist environments were overtaken by the real politic of 1968. Over the following year he produced a series *Sculpture of the Twentieth-Century* which repeats the outlines of missiles across a sequence of bland postcard views. Filko's montages play on the romance of the space race and pop sexuality, but the work is the antithesis of, say, Rauschenberg's, for their setting is the bleak urban landscape of modern Bratislava. Pop Art held a strong appeal but had a very different meaning for an artist who did not live in a world of advertising and consumer culture.

PAST AND FUTURE TENSE

Kaprow's book *Assemblage Environments & Happenings* had, in line with the participatory spirit of the work, included not only actions in Czechoslovakia but coverage of Japanese Happenings. Yet, despite this uncharacteristic inclusion of "the margins" in the 1960's American avant-garde, the book concluded with a classic piece of Cold War ideology:

> I have considered important those aspects of art which have been consciously intended to replace habit with the spirit of exploration and experiment. What is to be retained in the present work is those qualities of personal dignity and freedom always

championed in the West.[14]

Such a construction suppressed the connection between Happenings and the Russian and European traditions of the absurd. Perestroika has opened up the possibility of exploring such relations.

In Czechoslovakia, as there was no market for the unofficial artists, their work was not experienced in the capitalist form of the commodity. These artists did not suffer from an anxiety over commodification which has turned the Situationists and Fluxus artists away from the production of individual art objects and produced much "post-object" angst in the West.

While all of the artists have worked at times collaboratively, they do not constitute a movement. The significance of this range of informal activities is such that the work suggests some of the differences between living in New York, say, and Bratislava. In resisting the repressive State art, they sought links with an internationalist avant-garde, but such encounters were returned critically to their own circumstances, to their own folk cultures, to the regionally specific and everyday. It has recently been suggested that in marginal cultures such informal modes of art practice allow vernacular forms of inflection to evolve "as art consisting of more disparate elements (and of materials not generally associated with art) leaves lots of gaps and spaces which allow for plays of cultural conflict and reversals of meaning".[15]

In re-inflecting Czech and Slovak culture with a sense of international exchange one cannot ignore its history of enforced isolation, particularly after 1968. What we are proposing is a reading that emphasises positionality, and that reflects upon the cultural relations that are possible in a marginal culture.

(We would like to thank Linda Michael and Ian Burn in the preparation of this article.)

NOTES

(1) Bernard Smith, *Power Exhibition 2*, Farmer's Blaxland Gallery, Sydney, July 1969, p. 3.

(2) Linda Michael, *On Kawara Today — Works from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, 1990, p. 2.

(3) Jindrich Chalupecky, 'Letter From Prague', *Studio International*, June 1971, p. 255.

(4) Alan Kaprow, *Assemblage Environments & Happenings*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1966, p. 305.

(5) Ibid, p. 302.

(6) *Milan Knizak — Some Documentation 1961-1979*, Edition Arts Viva, Berlin, 1980, pp. 89-98.

(7) 'Happenings in Prague — A Manifestation by Czech Artists and Writers', *Studio International*, October 1966, pp. 210-211.

(8) Ibid, p. 210.

(9) *Knizak*, op. cit., p. 6.

(10) George Gibian,*The Man in the Black Coat: Russia's Literature of the Absurd*, Northwestern University Press, Illinois, 1987, p. 137.

(11) Jindrich Chalupecky, op. cit., pp. 88-89.

(12) Koller interview with authors, 1991.

(13) Stano Filko, 'Czech Environments', *Studio International*, June 1969, p. 269.

(14) Kaprow, op. cit., p. 208.

(15) Ian Burn, *Off the Wall/In the Air: A Seventies Selection*, Monash University Gallery, 1991, p. 4.

Off the Wall : In the Air - A Seventies Selection
Installation at Monash University Gallery, 1991
Photo courtesy Monash University Gallery.

Jenny Zimmer

THE PIECE–THE PROCESS–THE DETRITUS

a review of *off the wall/in the air - a seventies selection*

Off the Wall/In the Air — A Seventies Selection, at Monash University Gallery and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) from late June to early August, 1991

At an ACCA Forum arranged by Jennifer Duncan as an adjunct to *Off the Wall/In the Air*, Mike Parr posed the problem of how to deal with the "detritus" of the 1970s — how to recontextualise the independent "pieces" and "processes" in a 1990s art museum? He said:

> The real substance of 1970s performance art is in contradictory tension with the (documentary) evidence that remains. And the process of rehabilitating the evidence, in point of fact, induces the very ambivalence the work was designed to overcome... The works (on show) are just tips of icebergs leaving gaps. It's incongruous to see this beside that. We have to guard against the appearances they present and the paths they lead us. The exhibition of them is counter to their intentions [but] this new juxtaposition, in a sense, saves them from being a set of random artistic phenomena with little importance for the future.

The exhibition, a conceptual and perceptual *becoming-space* , crowded into two venues but still by no means exhaustive, sets up a systematic play of "differences" and "spacings". This offers artists in the 1990s significant new relationships with opportunity for reinterpretations and reinterrogations.

With his observation, Mike Parr identified discomfort caused by a knowledgeable '70s curator re-assembling, in another conceptual context, the unforgiving traces of an earlier decade. Current interest in artists like John Nixon, Peter Cripps, Mike Parr and Robert Owen — who have kept aloof from the subjective/expressive mainstream to maintain investigative processes — is part of the move towards a new abstraction and revived conceptualism increasingly evident as the1990s progress.

Jennifer Phipps' choice and arrangement of 1970s phenomena was both evocative and challenging — she emphasised the multitudinously plural directions of 1970s art whilst achieving unexpected conceptual and aesthetic juxtapostions. Inviting a play of differences, she recognised and celebrated what is often neglected in reflection on the 1970s — the high incidence of aesthetic Formalism still evident in art practice at the time. During the 1970s Phipps, as curator of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, was usually to be seen lurking in the vicinity of strategic happenings. She helped to legitimise the experimental as she championed the marginal.

In encapsulating a discrete decade, the exhibition clearly divided those who had experienced it from others who can only interpret the years as disjointed historical narrative — a time of "overturning". For the former it was proof that one *had* lived through something vitally important; for the latter it proposed worthwhile historical perspectives on the current revival of theoretically underpinned performance, installation, assemblage, abstraction and electronic media-based works. Icons of the 70s — long relegated to storerooms or artists' garages — came out looking good enough to prompt calls for urgent re-assessment along with a renewed look at the intellectual climate of the decade. *Off the Wall/In the Air* gave clear warning that the 1970s obsessive and now seen to be rather futile, mission to "dematerialise the art object", and to demystify it, will be totally subverted by museum processes, personal vanities, reproduction techniques and theoretical reinterpretation.

These were the curiously messy years between the apogée of colour-field Minimalism and the revival of gestural subjectivism in 1980s studio painting and sculpture. It was the decade in which Marshall McLuhan's definition of art as "anything you could get away with" seemed justified. Art practice was extended, causing alarm for some, to performance, events, Happenings, earth-works, body-art, assemblage, installation and serialisation. Junk, funk and ephemera existed alongside the on-going production of ambitious and specifically-intentioned formal studio works. Dominated by infinitely extendable

pluralistic attitudes, and now out-dated theoretical concerns like the role of artistic "intention" or political dialectic, the diversity of practice was more wildly experimental than it is now — and less faithful to its rather ill-defined theoretical bases. Divergences between "form and content" and "description and interpretation" were less rigid in the 1970s — necessitating considerable caution when superficial comparisons with today's practice seem justified. This point was consistently made in the arrangement of the works within the exhibition.

Influenced by the demonstrations and riots of the 1960s, it appeared that the dominant theory tended towards quasi-political rhetoric — hopeful, naive, loosely and sometimes opportunistically applied, partly believed and imperfectly understood Marxist dogma. Widely read authors included Marx, Mao, Sontag, Marcuse, Lukacs, Berger, Lippard and McLuhan. Channelled through *Art & Language*, dialectical applications of theory provided a late reaction to US "Coca-Colonisation" and the "Cold War" tactics then perceived to have permeated the grand era of New York-style cultural imperialism.

This radical, dissenting, anti-establishment stand was featured at ACCA. At the previously mentioned Forum, Peter Kennedy asked whether the original intensity of the debate — already well launched in the 1960s — was reflected in the show ? Mike Parr questioned whether the incipient "processes", then presented as discrete "pieces", enjoyed continuity to the 1990s ? Both questions could be answered in the affirmative. For instance, John Nixon's *Notes on Asserting* (1972) viewed in proximity to Mike Parr and Aleks Danko's *Lafart* publications (1975-76) reinforced the 1970s notion of art as individual or group activity in the interests of a unified process of social development — an intensely political project. Peter Tyndall, Robert Rooney, Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden using construction, collage, Xerox, broadsheet and poster, made the making of art a social act.

But Marxism, while it railed effectively against aesthetic tradition, did not leave room for a speculative dialectic - the resolution of an *interval* which would release the powerful dissonance the art of the 1970s needed to be convincing. Marxist rhetoric tended to be repudiated by its Australian proponents about the time Marcuse discarded it. To complicate the picture, the bureaucratisation of the art world was by the late 1970s another guiding force behind art production and exposition, and was effectively subsuming objects of dissent. At ACCA the revolutionary artefacts looked benign and rather attractive. This effect was amplified by Phipps' arrangement of items into aesthetic passages like the "white room" at Monash which included abstract paintings and constructions such as Robert Rooney's *Coats* (1973), Robert Hunter's *Untitled* (1970), Ti Parks' *Drawing No. 2*, Tony Tuckson's *White on Black with Paper* (c. 1973), Paul Partos' *Untitled White* (1974), Robert MacPherson's *Queensland Series* (1977-78), Dale Hickey's *Group of Cups* (c. 1972-73), Howard Arkley's *Operations — Notch Trim* (1975).

The 1970s were also driven by Neo-Dada experimentation, a sense of the curious and ridiculous, and the existential notion that the work of art is defined by the declared intentions of the artist. The direct line from Marcel Duchamp through to Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg was extended in 1970s Australian art practice. The 1970s emphasis on artists' intention is, as Charles Green points out in his excellent catalogue essay, quite at odds with post-structural inter-textuality. An as-yet under-developed sense of the omnipotence of theory encouraged less self-conscious cultural spoofs like Robert MacPherson's *Queensland Series* (1977-78) or Imants Tillers' *Conversations with the Bride* (1974-75) — the former making subtle political comment while the latter lampoons Hans Heysen's gum-trees and the entire Australian pastoral tradition.

The decade's attention to social commentary was acknowledged by the inclusion, at ACCA, of Peter Kennedy's *Introductions* series (1976), a detailed investigation of Australian clubs and social groupings, and of Micky Allen's hand-coloured *Babies* (1976). Vivienne Binns' *Mother's Memories, Others' Memories* (1980),

Kevin Mortensen
Brave Chief Running Dog (no date)
plaster, clay, synthetic polymer, resin, steel armature, bitumen, wax, wood
Photo courtesy Monash University Gallery.

exhibited at the Monash Gallery, referred to a feminist discourse of the decade. Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden's rotary card file entitled *(Index (model (...)))* (1970) presented messages such as: "There is no coherence about an aggregate of all possible art worlds. It may be convenient to talk of 'the art world', but that does not render it a structure. There is no ontology of the art world, only many ontologies offered by many". Projects like these reflect what Mike Parr called, in the context of this show, the crucial but fragile path of ideas towards problems of culture and identity. This process continues today.

Apt in terms of the pluralism fully exploited in this exhibition, the Burn/Ramsden collaboration, in the first room at Monash, reminded the viewer of the 1970s sense of the importance of a linguistic base and the role of the art work — however abstract it might appear — in cataloguing, conserving and recording ideas. A second room at Monash was dominated by works as colourful and diverse as Peter Booth's powerful *Man on the Road* (1977), Mike Parr's *Black Box/Theatre of Self-Correction, Part 1* (1979), Ti Parks' *Polynesian 100* (1973) and Imants Tillers' *Conversations with the Bride* (1974-75). This room celebrated the role of new media. Photographic play, experimentation with installation, the beginnings of notions of the theorisation of the self and the body as social text, were highly evident. Next door the third room was reserved for the funk and post-Pop object art informed by Feminism and by Neo-Dada thought processes inherited from the USA.

Tony Coleling's *Mr and Mrs Australia* (1973), Tim Burns' *What about Cross Walks in Mildura?* (1976), Robert Rooney's *Holden Park 1 & 2 May, 1970* (1970), Margaret Dodd's *Holden* (1972) and Aleks Danko's *Day to Day* (1974) offer early comment on consumerism and the status of Australian cultural artefacts. The works exploited processes made possible by new media, found objects, community involvement and the concept of serialisation. Humour was not neglected.

In a further curatorial masterstroke Phipps positioned Jenny Christmann's *20 Woollen Books* (1977-78) in close proximity to Robert Rooney's *Super-Knit 1* (1969) with Chips MacKinolty and Marie McMahon's *The D'Oyley Show* poster (1979), Isobel Davies' *Kitchen Creation* (1978), Tony Coleling's celebrated *Yellow Cake* (1980) and Bob Parr's *Stll Life* (1976) close by. These and other works by Elizabeth Gower, Marlene Creaser, Hilary Archer and Marr Grounds integrated 1970s social concerns with the problematics of "objecthood", which were part of an almost universal passion for the ironic — after Jasper Johns. Curious inclusions in this room were Jenny Watson's *Yellow Painting: John* (1974) — a portrait of John Nixon in a beach shirt — and Ken Searle's *Kangerigor Fountain* (1978), reminders that easel painting, however idiosyncratic, was still important.

Kevin Mortenson's *Brave Chief Running Dog*, sensitively situated in the foyer, provided a reminder of an important point made by Mike Parr — that while 1970s artists were sometimes obsessed with completing "the piece". It could later be seen as part of a continuing process. The fascination with "the piece" and "the process" explains both the delightful eclecticism of the show and also the continuity that has occurred in the work of those artists who have allowed the ongoing investigative process to subvert the finality of the piece.

Rex Butler

GENERIC ABSTRACTION

on Thierry De Duve's 'the monochrome and the blank canvas'

> There is a superficial similarity between Modernist painting and Dada in one important respect: namely, that just as Modernist painting has enabled one to see a blank canvas as a picture, Dada and Neo-Dada have equipped one to treat virtually any object as a work of art
>
> Michael Fried

Recently, the whole possibility of a generic art has arisen, both here (Janet Burchill, ADS Donaldson, John Nixon) and overseas (John Armleder, Richard Artschwager, Gerhard Mertz). It would be an art that would lie somewhere between painting and sculpture without being either. Does this work have its own conventions according to which it can be judged? Can it be judged aesthetically or only according to a logic or history of art? Is it a matter of art or merely of a kind of art theory? These are very current questions, but as Thierry de Duve shows in his essay 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas', they first arose some thirty years ago in the wake of Frank Stella's *Striped Paintings* of 1959.[1]

De Duve begins by outlining Clement Greenberg's response to the *Striped Paintings* and works like them. In short, he did not approve. According to him, the "limiting conditions of painting can be pushed back indefinitely before the picture stops being a picture", but the further back these limits are pushed "the more explicitly they have to be observed". Too far and the painting turns into an "arbitrary object"(244). And it is as just such an "arbitrary object" that Greenberg sees Stella's canvases: "As for Stella's black paintings: they're plausible, but not good enough; his aluminium ones are better, but still not good enough" (301).

What is at stake here is the distinction between Greenberg's Modernism and Greenberg's Formalism. For Greenberg, Modernism is that self-critical tendency that began with Kant whereby each artistic medium had to determine what it and only it was capable of. For painting this was flatness and two-dimensionality, "and so modernist painting orientated itself to flatness as it did to nothing else" (250). But all this has to be considered in relation to Greenberg's Formalism. Formalism is not the simple reduction of form to content, as is so often held. Rather, form is only an access to an otherwise "unspecifiable" content — an "unspecifiability" that constitutes art as such (253). We can only judge the form of a painting, but the painting is not reduced to this: form is always subject to the higher demand of content. This is why the history of art is not simply the history of form in any predictive or prescriptive sense. The Modernist reduction of painting to its "limiting conditions" is only retrospective: it is only after a work of art is judged to be successful *aesthetically* that it is able to enter the history of Modernism *historically* or *logically*

This would be the contradiction implicit within Greenberg's method. On the one hand, its Modernism wants to make form equal to content, the "proper area of competence of each art coincide with all that was unique to the nature of its medium" (250). And on the other hand, its Formalism speaks of the impossibility of this, for in a good painting content can never be reduced to form. It is that contradiction implicit — and here the question of Greenberg's unresolved philosophical debts — in the antinomy between objective and subjective taste for Kant: each statement of taste takes it for granted that it is shared by all others, that agreement on aesthetic matters can be reached, and yet there is no rule by which we can determine aesthetic judgements, each statement of taste must be specific each time, unrepeatable.

What is opened up in the wake of this distinction between Modernism and Formalism is the question of how we are to judge works when they no longer follow that medium-specificity laid down by Modernism. The Modernist tendency for a work of art to be about its own "limiting conditions" is, as we know, not a prescription but only a tendency or tropism — and yet it does exert some pull on aesthetic judgement. What happens, in other words, when we are forced to choose between the logic of Modernism and the aesthetic of Formalism? This is the situation de Duve outlines in the following terms: either the "making and appreciation of art require nothing but a mere identification predicated on the conceptual 'logic' of

modernism and aesthetic judgement is no longer necessary" or "aesthetic judgement is still necessary. But the pressure that the conventions of painting put on its practice is now nil, and one is forced to allow for an art that is no longer the outcome of its specific history, a generic art" (261). The first would be a Modernism without Formalism; the second a Formalism without Modernism. Artists like Donald Judd and Joseph Kosuth opted for the first alternative; Greenberg and after him Michael Fried, for the second. But, as de Duve shows, neither would be possible without the other, both share a space at once united and divided by the possibility of a blank canvas being regarded as a work of art; that is to say, it is around this blank canvas that the last thirty years of art history have circulated. Accordingly, it is the place of this blank canvas within each half of this alternative that must be analysed.

FORMALISM WITHOUT MODERNISM

First, Greenberg and his Formalism without Modernism. Though the blank canvas would appear to be the perfect exemplification of Greenberg's Modernism as the stripping down of art to its "limiting conditions", he refuses to grant it the status of art. Or rather, he suspends his judgement as to its status as art. But the grounds of this suspension are interesting. At first, it is in terms of the specificity of painting. From a 1962 article entitled 'After Abstract Expressionism':

> The irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture — though not necessarily as a *successful* one (260).

But in an article written just two months afterwards, 'How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name', Greenberg changes his line of attack. Now the blank canvas is judged (or judgement is suspended) in terms of a more generic *art*: "Art turns out to be almost inescapable by now for anyone dealing with a flat surface, even if it is mostly bad art" (260).

What this reflects is the slowly — or rapidly — changing grounds of Greenberg's Modernism: from a specificity of painting to a multi-specificity of a painting combined with sculpture (after the second article Greenberg will argue for a sort of polychrome sculpture along the lines of Jules Olitski's paintings in which a sort of "residual illusionism" (259) still persists). This illusionism — like that earlier distinction between "flatness" and the "delimitation of flatness" — would be the last attempt to preserve some distinction between the form and the content of the work, to allow the possibility of some formal judgement concerning it. But with that series of increasingly "literal" works coming out in the wake of Stella's *Striped Paintings*, this distinction becomes harder to maintain. They would be truly generic works, to use Judd's term, *neither* painting *nor* sculpture. There could be no way of asking what their content was as opposed to their form within Greenberg's terms.

And this is why Greenberg suspends judgement concerning the blank canvas. Although it appears to be a perfect candidate for Modernist validation, at that very moment it would be unable to be judged according to its criteria. What this shows is that Modernism is always subject to a higher responsibility: that of judgement. The logic of Modernism is unable to be completed for at that moment it ends; nothing more can be said in terms of it. The logic of Modernism must always be suspended. As de Duve writes:

> To call a ready-made canvas a picture thus requires, and indeed utters, an aesthetic judgement. It is only liminally a positive judgement, however, because it is virtually impossible to tell whether what you value is the thing you are supposedly beholding or the tradition that has made this thing a candidate for aesthetic judgement. (The question is, of course, open as to whether this is not always the case with 'advanced' Modernist art at the very

Frank Stella
Khurasan Gate, 1970
oil on canvas
Photo courtesy Art Gallery of N.S.W.

moment when its 'advance' verges on the far-out and challenges aesthetic judgement.) To go beyond this liminal judgement and to call the ready-made canvas a successful picture would entail an interpretation in terms that Kandinsky or avant-gardistic art historians like Herbert Read might have endorsed, but not Greenberg. You would have to sense either its liberating potential or its provocative 'anti-art' value, or both. Yet to call it unsuccessful would constitute a disavowal of the aesthetic pressure that the series of surrenders constituting the history of Modernist painting had built up. It would have a retroactive effect on what appears, but only in retrospect, as the 'logic' of Modernism. It is thus essential to Greenberg's Modernism and Formalism that he should walk the thin line between a picture and a successful (or unsuccessful) one, and that he should suspend his judgement on the hypothetical case of the blank canvas, leaving it in its liminal, nominal state. Had the verdict fallen, whether positive or negative, it would have been final, if due only to the fact that when it is possible to aesthetically judge a hypothetical case — and it is perfectly feasible with the blank canvas; you don't need to see it (although, again, you would need to have seen one) — then a norm is set which is inescapable.The critic judging the blank canvas as successful would have been equivalent to an artist actualising it (285-286).

MODERNISM WITHOUT FORMALISM

Greenberg and those Formalist critics that come after him like Fried suspend their judgement before the blank canvas, are unable to go beyond it. To attempt to remedy this, therefore, we might look at that artistic tradition that explicitly comes *after* the possibility of the blank canvas: that of Duchamp's ready-made. It is that alternative account of twentieth-century art to Greenberg's Formalism without Modernism, what we might call a kind of Modernism without Formalism. As opposed to the necessity of an individual confrontation with the work of art in Greenberg, in which we judge the work *formally*, Duchamp's ready-mades lead the way to that Conceptualism in which the actual work of art is unimportant, need only be judged *logically, historically*. As Judd says: "A work of art needs only to be interesting" (272). Or as Kosuth puts it more radically: "A work of art is a tautology in that it is the presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is art is true a priori" (276). That is to say, as opposed to Greenberg's Formalism in which the work of art is validated retrospectively — it is only *after* it is regarded as a good work of art by a kind of consensus (either explicit or implicit) that it is able to enter the logic of Modernism — here there is what we might call a *prospective* Modernism: the work *will be* good as a result of the artist's own declaration. As opposed to the judging *of* convention by successive works of art so that what is convention can only be determined over a long period of time, here we are judging by these conventions themselves, conventions not tested by the works but strictly equivalent to them.

This alternative is certainly able to make the leap from the specific to the generic, from painting to art. It is no longer a matter of judging the work of art in terms of its medium, but rather of assessing its institutional context: it is this which determines whether a work of art is a work of art or not. As Kosuth writes:

> A work of art is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art... The 'art idea' (or 'work') and art are the same and can be appreciated as art without going outside the context of art for verification (294).

But, as de Duve notes, there is a kind of circularity here (294-295). It would be impossible to say which came first: whether it was the declaration by the artist which made it a work of art or the context made up of such statements that made the artist an artist able to make such statements. Is it the work of art which produces this context or this context which gives rise to the work of art? Benjamin H.D. Buchloch notes in similar circumstances that Kosuth's "discursive self-reflexivity" here repeats that autonomous

Formalism of which he is accusing Greenberg and Fried (and which Formalism, as opposed to Kosuth's Modernism, precisely is not).[2] Kosuth's "tautologies", that is to say, hide a kind of infinite regress: without a fixed starting point in the works themselves he would be unable to explain either how this Modernist logic begins or how it might be criticised.

MODERNISM AND FORMALISM

This is what is perhaps most surprising about 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas': the fact that de Duve is seriously prepared to defend Greenberg against the critiques of Judd and Kosuth (and implicitly the whole of post-modernity). What he wants to show there is that it is not simply a matter of choosing between the two alternatives opened up in the wake of Greenberg's rejection of Minimalism: either a Formalism without a Modernism or a Modernism without a Formalism. If Greenberg's aesthetic Formalism is not outside a certain "logic" of judgement — that with advanced modern art it is "virtually impossible to tell whether what you value is the thing you are beholding or the tradition that made it possible" — Judd's declaration that the work of art need only be "interesting" is itself incomplete, needs to be complemented with a certain Formalism: it is indeed true that with advanced modern art it is "virtually impossible to tell whether what you value is the thing you are beholding or the tradition that made it possible", but it is for just this reason that one cannot simply let the object go, that the two must be maintained together.[3] If Greenberg is not unambiguously *before* the logic of the blank canvas — after all, it is the possibility of the blank canvas which underpins the "logic" of his Formalism, what is contemplated at the very beginning of that Modernist series of reductions, by Kandinsky amongst others — so too would Duchamp's ready-made and all those works which followed it not simply be *after* it (for Duchamp himself never actually presented the blank canvas as a work of art). Both revolve around that blank canvas which is at once what each must deny it has in common with the other and what makes each possible. What de Duve is trying to do is reconcile Formalism and Modernism, think the possibility of a Formalism in the wake of the collapse of Greenbergian Modernism, replacing Greenberg's aesthetic specificity of painting not with a multi-specificity of painting and sculpture but with a truly aesthetic — and not merely logical — generic art. It is this de Duve calls *nominalism*, both here and in his book on Duchamp, *The Readymade: Duchamp, Painting and Modernity*.[4]

THE BLANK CANVAS

Let us go back to the blank canvas, this time looking at it from the perspective of Duchamp and the ready-made. If for Kandinsky in 1913 it beckons as the future of art — "this pure canvas that is itself as beautiful as a picture" (283) — for Duchamp in 1914 it marks the end of art. Or better, if for Greenberg the blank canvas is always in the future, unrealised, for Duchamp it is always already realised (and that is why he never had to make one); it is the end of art but an end that allows art to begin (Kosuth is right in a way when he says that Duchamp's ready-made marks "the end of philosophy and the beginning of art"). The blank canvas marks the passage in Duchamp (and elsewhere) from the specific to the general; but the blank canvas would itself be the very space separating the two, that is to say again, the blank canvas is never itself actualised. De Duve puts it very subtly:

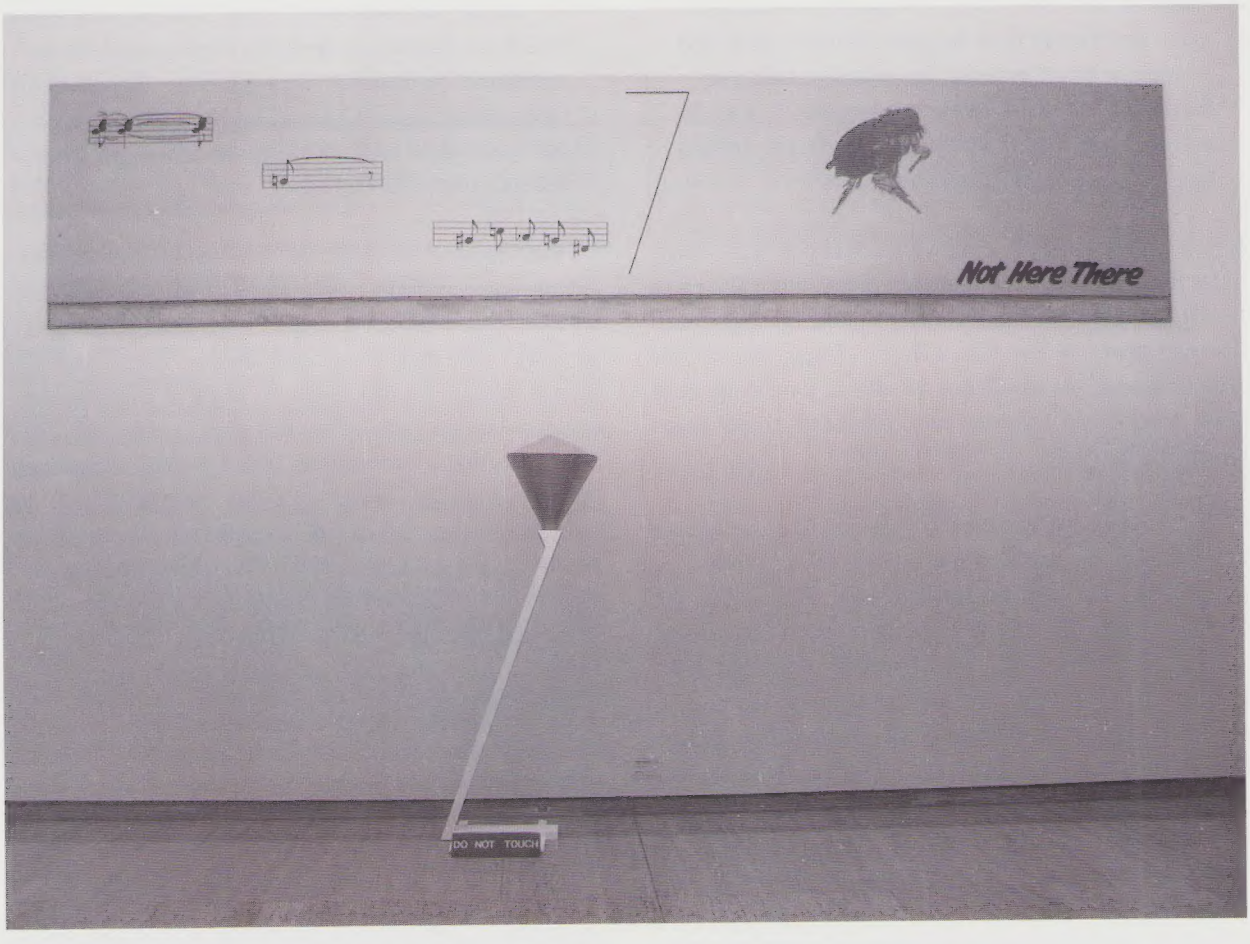
> You may become an artist without being a painter, but hardly without having been one. As we have seen, this holds true for all Minimal and Conceptual artists. Fifty years after the ready-made, they had to re-enact a certain rite of passage, which Duchamp was the first to accomplish. Similarly, something Minimal or Conceptual beyond the blank canvas can be art without being a picture, but not without the blank canvas having been one — which is why, ironically, the Minimalists and the Conceptualists sought their authority to do generic art from Greenberg's 1962 article [the first of those two articles we quoted where Greenberg suspends judgement concerning the blank canvas], where he sets out to posit the blank canvas as the embodiment of painting's ultimate specificity, as if warning not

to transgress it (282-3).

This is why de Duve speaks of the blank canvas in a strange future imperfect tense: "the blank canvas *will have been* a picture" (284). From the point of view of the end of art (Greenberg) it will be seen that the blank canvas was there at the very beginning or that the blank canvas was the very beginning of art (Duchamp). But is this not the very temporality of aesthetic judgement itself: the *will have been* ? Do we not say when we are making a work of art (or indeed judging one) that the idea is to make it so that in retrospect it seems destined [5]? That is to say, even though it is not agreed upon at the time, even though the object itself changes the very aesthetic tradition it is drawing upon (that is why any disavowal of the blank canvas would have a "retroactive effect on what appears, but only in retrospect, as the 'logic' of Modernism"), we must act as though this tradition somehow justifies it, leads up to it. Every work of art is thus tautological, an effect of its own declaration to be art — but this not in Kosuth's sense that the work of art is a result of the artist's intention, but because every good work of art remodels the conventions of art so that everything is seen in light of it. It is not that those conventions were this way before it, but they are necessarily this way after it: they will have been. What Kosuth cannot explain when he says that a work of art is a work of art because it is regarded as a work of art, is how a new work of art could be produced: this would be impossible without that Formalism which declares that each work of art must *test* those conventions by which it is judged (as opposed to Kosuth, we might say that a work of art can be a work of art only if it is first *not* a work of art). And what Greenberg for his part cannot explain is that those conventions he refers to would only exist *after* the work: it is not a question of some pre-existing medium which painting gradually approaches but rather of a *name* of art at once before and only after any judgement made about it. All this is to take seriously Fried's remark that it is not conceivable that the blank canvas could ever be a work of art — or, if it were, nothing more than the name of painting would remain (287).

This is de Duve's *nominalism* and he wants to show how it works in the case of Duchamp, how in the case of Duchamp's ready-mades it is possible to judge them formally not on the basis of the medium of painting but in the name of art. The point he wants to make is that Duchamp's act of showing the urinal at the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917 was not merely institutional or political but *aesthetic*. Not only was Duchamp's position as chairman of the hanging committee as a result of him being a painter (295-296), but the question the jury must decide in such situations is always: is this art or not (293)? It is a question all spectators of art have had to decide, all the way from Manet's *Masquerade at the Opera* in 1874 up to the blank canvas and beyond. And in such cases there is always a mediation between the artist working on the basis of rules drawn from the past and the crowd in the future, whether they are actual "hypothetical or future spectators" (290) or merely the projection of the artist taking into account "in advance, the probable verdict of the crowd" (292). The good artist always says this: I will have been. But if this means that he is always justified in his belief, it also means that it is always uncertain whether this belief will ever be justified: the blank canvas is still unmade, it is not yet that nothing but the name of painting remains (288). This is the risk or speculation involved in all judgement, in the name: it at once guarantees something, ensures that the work of art will be taken up, creates a space in which it will be taken up; and all of this not until it has returned from that future to which it was consigned, until it has been taken up. De Duve has written an extraordinary essay on all of this, 'Marcel Duchamp, or The *Phynancier* of Modern Life', where he speaks of a sort of cheque being drawn on tradition by the artist, the way the artist borrows against the name of art to hopefully return it when he himself is taken up by it.[6] And on the name of Duchamp, Duchamp as that artist who first thought through the way that the name (the artist's name, the name of art) is at once taken up, repaid, and never adequately acknowledged, always owed. Rosalind Krauss writes in 'Bachelors', in which she speaks of Sherrie Levine's casting of the malic molds from *The Bride Stripped Bare* :

> And nothing needs to be added to these



Janet Burchill and Jennifer McCamley
Not here, there, 1989
screen print, elastic cord, enamel, metal, wax, wood chanel, rice, plinth, bowl
Photo courtesy Art Gallery of N.S.W.

> bachelors. They are just as Duchamp left them, readymade. Not as he made them, for on the field of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* they are in the two dimensions of sheets of lead, but as he projected them, within the notes he so patiently stored in *The Green Box*.. To cast the bachelors in glass, and then to frost the glass, is therefore to add nothing, to create nothing. It is to accept Duchamp's bachelors, his malic forms, readymade. It is to do nothing more than to occupy that historical position that can be called the Duchamp effect.[7]

Levine at once merely follows Duchamp here — casts those malic molds as "he projected them, within the notes he so patiently stored [undoubtedly waiting for someone to discover them] in *The Green Box*" — and none of this would be true, we would not see this in Duchamp, until *after* Levine had followed him, filled that empty space created by his name.

This is what de Duve means by saying that Duchamp's exhibition of the urinal is not merely an institutional or political act but also an aesthetic one. It involves the question of whether it is art or not, whether it can be seen within any tradition that would justify us calling it art (whether it will lead to any tradition that will allow us to call it art). And this is essentially a formal question. But, as De Duve notes, the Formalist doctrine requires that anything that "deserves to be called art needs to stand up to a comparison with the art of the past, at least of its immediate past" (297); it is a matter of comparing the various conventions — forms — of art. But before something can withstand comparison, a comparison must be possible. How could one compare Duchamp's *Fountain* to a painting? There are two ways in which this is feasible, says de Duve:

> The first is to cling as faithfully as possible to the Modernist narrative of the history of modern art and to seek the missing link between the urinal and painting, the generic and the specific. The second would be to replace the Modernist narrative with another way of writing the history of modern art, a way that would reintegrate its political and institutional context into its aesthetic context. The first quite naturally led me to investigate an episode in history to whose shaping the Modernist narrative literally contributed, and to notice — quite naturally — that it provided the missing link between the urinal and painting. Indeed, the blank canvas can be compared to both: it is a picture, 'though not necessarily a successful one', and it is a ready-made, though, I might add, not as successful a ready-made as Duchamp's (297-298).

The first way, we might call Modernism and say that it is constituted either by a Formalism without Modernism or a Modernism without Formalism — it would be that aporia we have noted around the blank canvas. The second way tries to account for this aporia, to speak of why this blank canvas is always both before and after, "exhausted" (283) in advance and left unrealised. It tries to think at once taste and the logic of taste, both the singularity and the conventionality involved in aesthetic judgements, precisely that antinomy which Greenberg inherits from Kant but leaves unresolved. It is again just that temporality of the *will have been*: with avant-garde art it is not simply a matter of taste but rather of a taste that "expects to be breached or surprised by the avant-garde artist" (298). This taste would be at once before the work, anticipating it, and after it, arising only in response to the shock of the work. It would be an anticipation that the work tries to take into account and it would be a taking-into-account that this taste tries to anticipate. And it would be in this sense finally that de Duve speaks of the name of art: this name is not realised (the blank canvas is not actualised, that second kind of explanation remains hypothetical, we can still only speak in terms of either a Formalism without Modernism or a Modernism without Formalism), but it would be precisely in this failure that the name persists. The name of art only stands in for something unnameable, at once what every work of art speaks for, tries to represent, and what can never be spoken for, what is excluded by this representation. Fried says that if the blank canvas is able to be a successful picture, only the name of art would remain, but what he does not realise is that the blank canvas *is* the

name of art, which is to say at once realises art and leaves the name of art blank, unrealisable. The name of art at once allows the blank canvas to be a successful picture and would prevent it from being a successful picture, is what prevents the name of art from ever being definitively realised, even by the blank canvas itself.

NOTES

(1) Thierry de Duve, 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas', in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal*, ed. Serge Guilbaut, MIT Press, 1989. All page references to this text are included within brackets in the main text.

(2) Benjamin H.D. Buchloch, 'From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* 57, p. 63.

(3) This would be why de Duve can speak of Judd's and Kosuth's positions being "over-determined" by Greenberg, why Greenberg's work would constitute a certain "double-bind" for artists. One could reject his Formalism only to follow that other path he sets out: Modernism. It is that aporia or double-bind constituted by the blank canvas itself.

(4) Thierry de Duve, *The Readymade: Marcel Duchamp, Painting and Modernity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991. De Duve has also written an article on Duchamp which takes up many of the issues around the question of the unmade ready-made of the blank canvas: 'The Readymade and the Tube of Paint', *Artforum*, May 1986.

(5) De Duve writes: "What was the nature of Manet's experience and judgement — the one Mallarmé calls 'the nebulous vote of the painters' — when he declared the painting finished, although he knew that the jury would most probably find it too unfinished to even call it a painting? He had already gone through the Salon des Refusés, and we know of his anxieties and striving for public recognition. Was that experience, that aesthetic judgement, not in the nature of anticipated retrospection?" (291)

(6) "The Mona Lisa Bank [of Duchamp's *Bruno Cheque*, 1965] is the Louvre. Every artist, even and above all the *enfant terrible* of the avant-gardes, writes cheques on tradition. They only have the value of that with which he or she repays tradition. For the *arrhe* of painting posterity will pay the balance, if it has enough of a sense of humour", Thierry de Duve, 'Marcel Duchamp, or The *Phynancier* of Modern Life', *October* 52, p. 74.

(7) Rosalind Krauss, 'Bachelors', *October* 55, pp. 57-58.